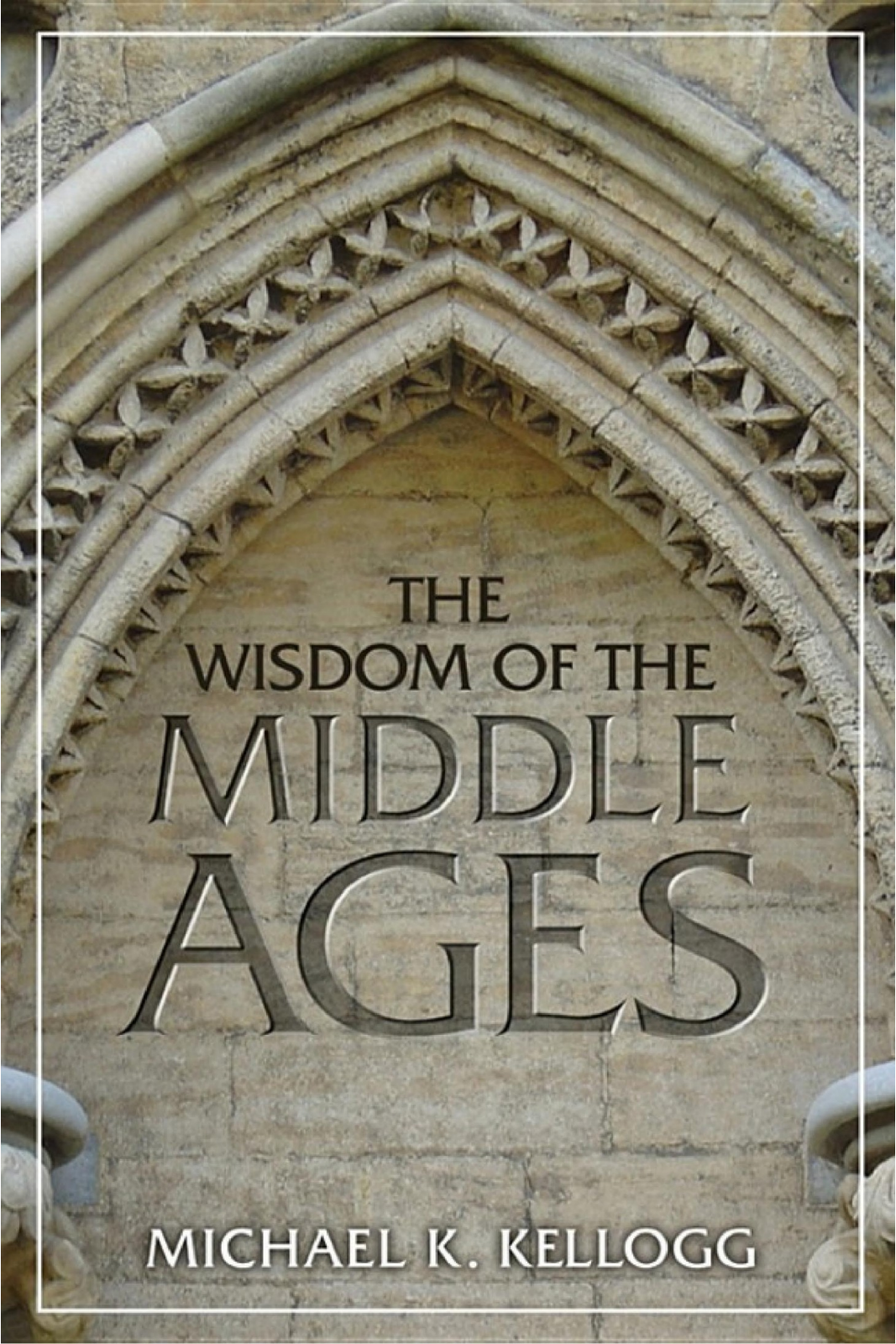
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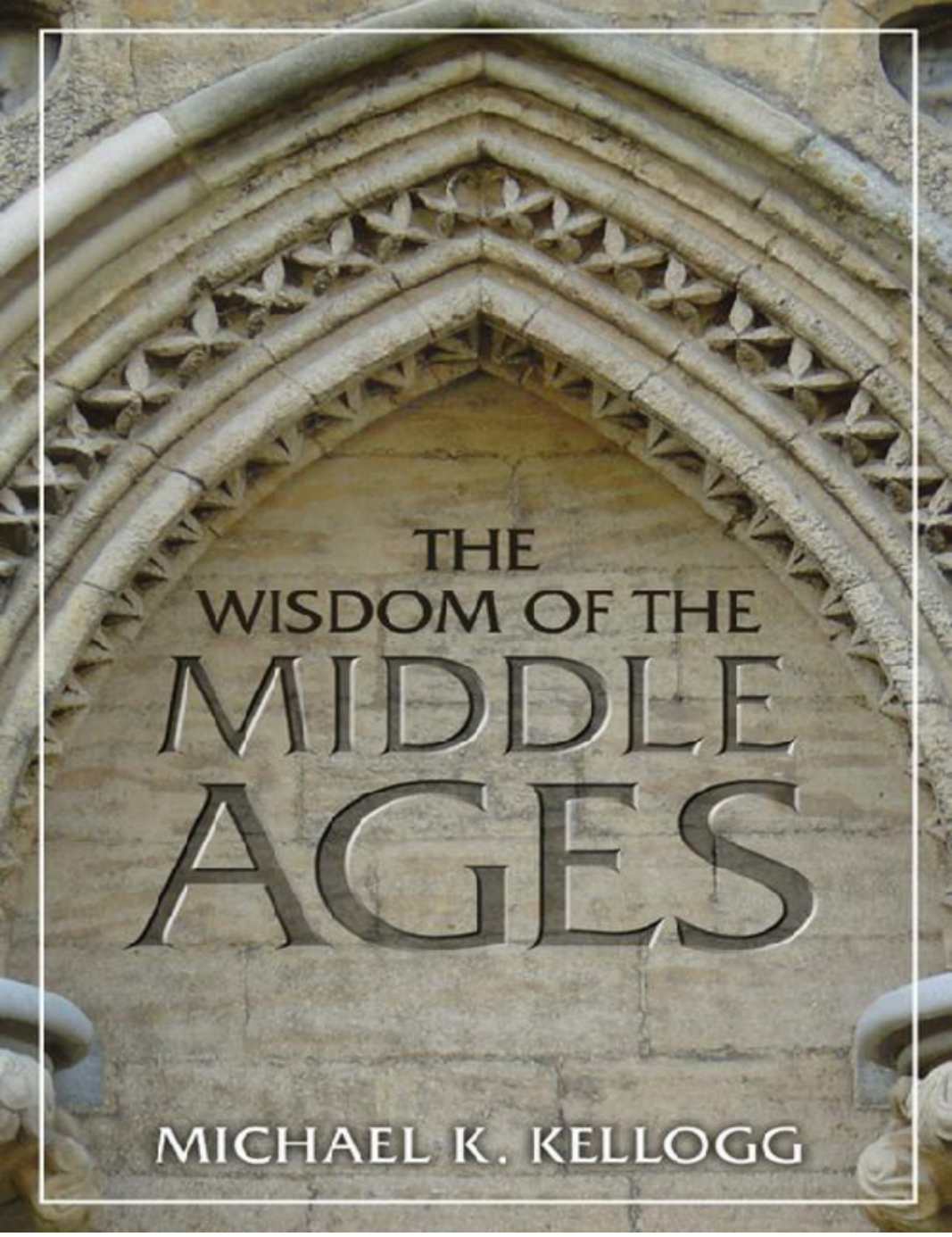
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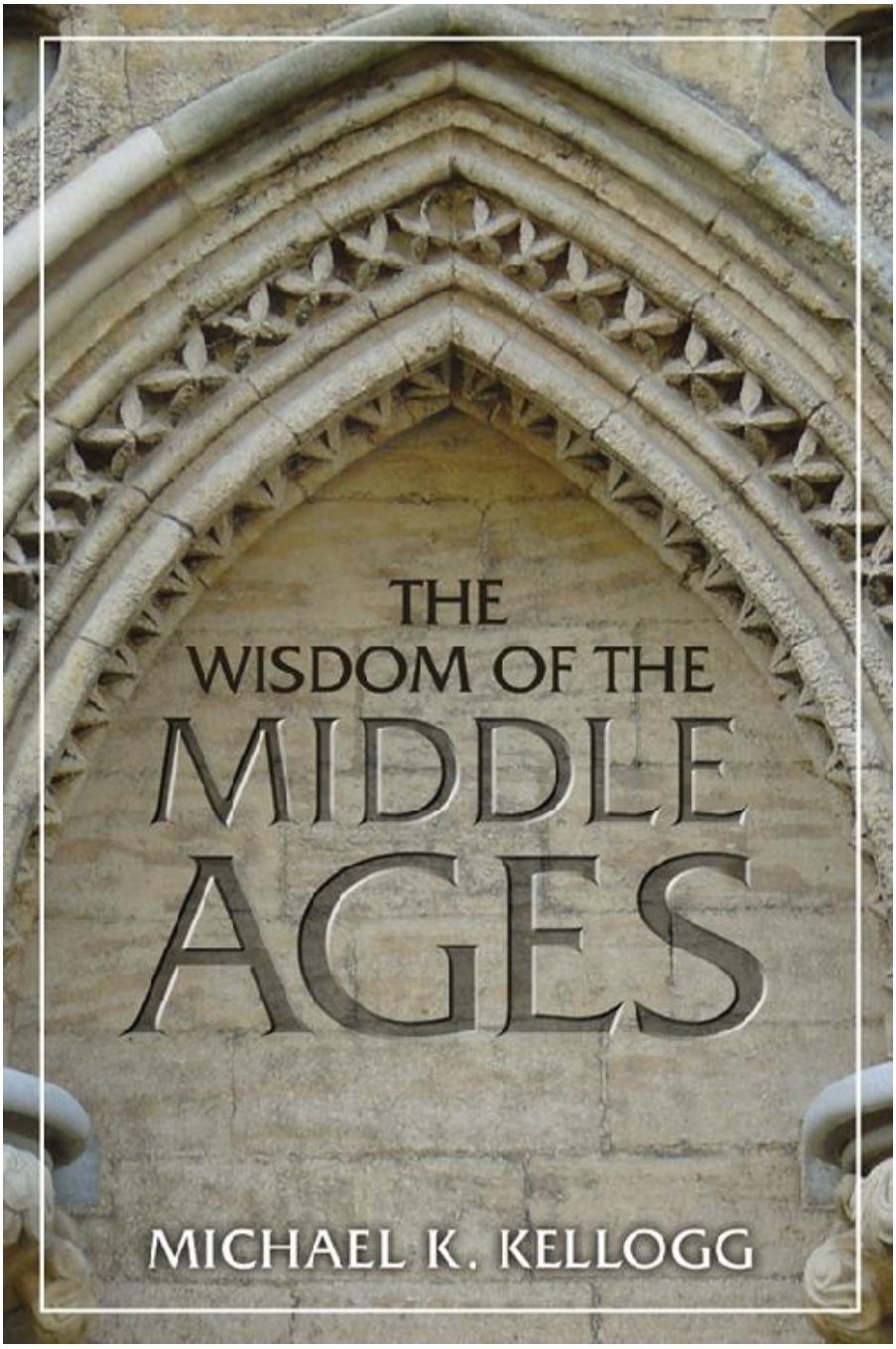
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*Three Questions We Never Stop Asking*

# THE WISDOM OF THE MIDDLE AGES

Michael K. Kellogg

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*. . . ne hyrde ic snotorlicor*
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*Pu eart maegenes strang ond on mode frod,*
*wis wordcwida.*

—*Beowulf*, ll. 3181, 1842–45

# CONTENTS

Preface

Introduction: The Middle Ages: Disintegration and Renewal

Chapter 1: The New Testament and the Invention of Christianity

Chapter 2: Augustine's *Confessions*: Journey of a Restless Heart

Chapter 3: Boethius—The Classical Tradition on Trial

Chapter 4: *Beowulf* and the Heroic Ideal

Chapter 5: Abelard and Heloise

Chapter 6: From Epic to Romance: The *Song of Roland* and the Arthurian Adventures of Chrétien de Troyes

Chapter 7: Francis and Aquinas: Mendicant Friars Who Transformed the Church

Chapter 8: Dante and the *Commedia*

Chapter 9: Boccaccio and the Art of the Story

Chapter 10: Chaucer on the Road to Canterbury

Acknowledgments

Chronology

Suggestions for Further Reading

Notes

Index

# PREFACE

*There are no agreed medieval writers of "classical" status, and no medieval period to match Periclean Athens or Augustan Rome.*
—D. J. A. Matthew[1]

I profoundly disagree with the statement above. It may be true that there was no single medieval period and location to equal Periclean Athens or Augustan Rome, or Elizabethan London for that matter. The great works of the Middle Ages spanned a thousand years, from Augustine's *Confessions*, circa 400, to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, circa 1400. They also spanned the Western world, from Hippo, in North Africa, to London, to Paris, to Florence, and to the other city-states of Italy. The flowering of the Middle Ages was both gradual and diffuse, although Florence did give birth in a forty-eight-year span to the three crowns of Italian literature: Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.

The Middle Ages are but one part of an "intelligible unit" that runs from Homer to Goethe.[2] Yet Augustine, Boethius, the anonymous authors of *Beowulf* and the *Song of Roland*, Chrétien de Troyes, Abelard and Heloise, Saint Francis, Aquinas, Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer are not, as one scholar has suggested, just landmarks along "the crumbling Roman road from the antique to the modern."[3] They stand comparison with their classical ancestors and their modern successors. Perhaps none besides Dante stands as tall as Homer and Goethe, but that is hardly a fair standard. We can learn today an enormous amount from the wisdom and passion of each of these thinkers and writers.

What we are dealing with is literature—that is, the great intellectual and spiritual tradition of Western culture as given form in language. It contains

> imperishable treasures of beauty, greatness, faith. It is a reservoir of spiritual energies through which we can flavor and ennoble our present-day life.[4]

Even those who are religious tend to approach the Middle Ages warily, as a time in which belief was made to fit a procrustean bed fashioned by logic-chopping theologians. How much harder, then, for the nonreligious and especially the areligious to read medieval authors with an open mind? We expect to learn very little from Augustine or Boethius, much less from Abelard or Aquinas, bound as they are within a superstructure of beliefs that cannot be challenged. That is a profound mistake. The authors we will study were dealing with very human problems and were constantly pushing the boundaries of expression, belief, and accepted norms. Louis Mackey, an acute analyst of medieval philosophy, writes:

> I am persuaded that the acutest minds of the Middle Ages were not enslaved by their faith. On the contrary, it was their occasion of opportunity. Religious belief provided medieval philosophers with an enabling circumstance: a context that gave their speculations vast scope and power and at the same time demanded of them a salutary humility. It empowered their imaginations, refined their critical faculties, kept them conscious of their limitations, and exposed them to their most extreme possibilities.[5]

The same is true of medieval authors of epic and lyric poetry and of prose narratives. They are not foreign to us. They are not ensconced in impenetrable certainty and complacency. They are not trapped in a past or a belief system that we cannot understand. They speak to us directly and have helped to make us what we are today. If we do not understand them, it is only because we have not made the effort to do so.

In this book, I try to make that effort. I cannot claim complete success, but I can claim that the wisdom of the Middle Ages is worthy of our respect and exploration.

# Introduction

# THE MIDDLE AGES

## Disintegration and Renewal

Historians, like nations, are constantly seeking to expand their borders, though generally chronologically rather than geographically. Traditionally, the Middle Ages were marked from the deposition of the last western Roman emperor in 476 to the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. But those dates are under attack from both ends. Historians of ancient Rome now tout Late Antiquity as a period in which the continuities are more interesting than the differences, and push their research to 600 and beyond.[1] Renaissance scholars in turn trace their period's antecedents to the early twelfth century.[2] What remains in between is often dismissed as the Dark Ages, enlivened only with a few colorful events, such as the beating back of Islam by Charles Martel in 732; the crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman emperor on Christmas Day in 800; the investiture conflicts that left a penitent Henry IV standing in the snow at Canossa for three days in 1077; and the capture of Jerusalem in 1099 during the First Crusade.

In his breezy dismissal of the Middle Ages, *A World Lit Only by Fire*, William Manchester sees little more than "a mélange of incessant warfare, corruption, lawlessness, obsession with strange myths, and an almost impenetrable mindlessness."[3] Manchester decries the high homicide rate, widespread malnutrition and disease, brutal forms of entertainment, religious fanaticism, and gross inequality in wealth, freedom, and living conditions. Bestselling historian Barbara Tuchman calls even the comparatively advanced fourteenth century "a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age."[4] In other

words, the Middle Ages were a time very much like the present, and we have a great deal to learn from the efforts of medieval thinkers and writers to give shape and meaning to their experience.

For most who lived in the Western world during the period between 476 and 1453, change must have seemed glacial rather than seismic. But three great trends are readily traceable in retrospect: the disintegration of the western Roman Empire; the steady rise of the Catholic Church as an institution and source of social stability; and the inchoate formation of the ethnically rich nation-states that make up modern Europe. Some modern historians are dismissive of these "grand narratives."[5] Certainly, overarching themes should not distract us from the chaos and continuity of everyday life or from the serendipity and lack of transparency with which historical events actually unfolded. But they nonetheless provide us with an organizational structure that is both convenient and compelling.[6]

## LATE ANTIQUITY (CA. 312–CA. 565)

However arbitrary the periodization of history may be, it is useful for our purposes to measure Late Antiquity from the conversion of Constantine in 312 to the death of Justinian in 565. This period paved the way for what we consider the Middle Ages proper. It was a time in which the nascent Christian church waxed and the western Roman Empire waned under pressure from German tribes migrating across the borders. The result was a fascinating and, for a time, surprisingly stable mix of the classical tradition, Christian morality, and "barbarian" vigor. The final collapse of the western empire came only after Justinian made a bold but disastrously unsuccessful effort to reconstitute it.

The Roman Empire at the end of the third century circumscribed the Mediterranean and was bordered in the north and east by the Rhine and Danube Rivers. Its influence in North Africa was confined largely to coastal areas. In western Europe, the empire embraced what would become Great Britain, Spain, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Italy. To the east, it included the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, Armenia, Syria, and Egypt.

The emperor Diocletian (r. 284–305) started the process by which this far-flung empire was divided into east and west, with separate administrative centers at Milan and Constantinople (at that time still called Byzantium). He was also responsible in 303 for the last great persecution of Christians, who constituted no more than 10 percent of

the population.[7] The status and standing of Christianity changed dramatically in 312 when a multisided fight to succeed Diocletian finally culminated in the victory of Constantine at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, just outside Rome. Before the battle, Constantine sought the support and protection of the Christian God and claimed to have seen a flaming cross in the sky as a sign of his coming victory. Thereafter, to fulfill his pact with the Christian God, Constantine protected the clergy and Christian worshippers from persecution. At first, he encountered considerable resistance from his pagan subjects. But Constantine made no effort to suppress paganism; he merely cleared the way for the natural growth and rapid spread of Christianity. The Edict of Milan in 313 promised freedom of worship and equal dignity for all faiths. Unfortunately, that promise was rarely kept in the ensuing centuries.

After Constantine, all the emperors were at least nominal Christians except Julian the Apostate (r. 361–363), a student of ancient philosophy who tried unsuccessfully to restore paganism as the official religion of the empire. But Julian's reign was cut short when in 363 he was killed fighting the Persians. Theodosius (r. 379–395) made Christianity the official religion and outlawed paganism. Christianity was particularly intense in the area around Syria, where the desert fathers went to eschew worldly affairs, live in isolation, and forge an ascetic connection with God. Simon the Stylite spent nearly forty years praying atop a fifty-foot pillar near Aleppo.

Just what constituted Christianity, however, was still a matter of lively dispute. The Council of Nicaea convened by Constantine in 325 adopted the Nicene Creed in an effort to unify the empire and to combat Arianism. The Nicene Creed proclaimed Christ “one in Being with the Father,” God incarnate as Man. But disputes about the nature of Christ and other issues continued throughout Late Antiquity: Manichees, Donatists, Pelagians, and Monophysites, as well as Arians and other sects, all flourished at various times and in various places. The church fathers—Ambrose, Jerome, and Augustine, in particular—sought in their extensive writings to resolve these difficult questions and to settle upon a uniform version of the Christian faith. But allegations of heresy and acts of persecution would continue throughout the Middle Ages, and Christianity itself absorbed many remnants of pagan rituals and mystery cults.

Under the protection of Christian emperors, the church spread and flourished. It continued to thrive even as the western empire slowly disintegrated. Indeed, the church provided the only institutional continuity for a vast populace in the west; even the Germanic tribesmen embraced it. Germanic tribesmen had been employed for decades as mercenaries in the Roman army. By 400, as many as 50

percent of Roman soldiers were Germanic. They patrolled the border areas and protected the empire against their own people. They were also allowed to settle within those border regions and gradually penetrated deeper into Roman territory. Most of them were Christians, albeit Arian Christians who believed that Christ was a lesser divinity created by God. It was an unstable alliance, however, as more and more migrants (*invaders* is too strong a word), seeking refuge from marauding Slavs and Huns, crossed the Rhine and Danube Rivers. They wanted not to conquer the empire but to find a secure place for themselves within it. Only when that was not forthcoming, despite repeated promises on the part of the Romans, did they resort to arms.

In 378, a band of Visigoths (a Germanic tribe from what is now Romania) wiped out a Roman army at Adrianople, killing the eastern emperor Valens. This battle was a critical turning point. The seeming invincibility of the Roman forces had proved a myth; the Visigoths and other tribes realized that power was theirs for the taking. And take it they did, though the process was far from rapid and could probably have been stemmed at several points through wiser attempts to settle and to integrate the northern tribes. With the death of Valens, Theodosius became emperor of both east and west. But he was the last common emperor. After his own death in 395, the divisions between east and west were clearly established. The eastern empire, with its capital at Constantinople, survived for another thousand years. The western empire suffered a rapid decline.

In 401, the Visigoth chieftain Alaric, a former Roman commander and Arian Christian, invaded Italy. Again, the Visigoths were looking for a home, not a conquest. The Romans repeatedly promised one to them, as well as funds for settlement. But the promises were always broken. In desperation, Alaric sacked Rome in 410 and held it hostage for several days, hoping to get Honorius, the western emperor, to acknowledge and meet their demands for a homeland. But Honorius did nothing to protect Rome. Diocletian had already moved the seat of the western empire northward from Rome to Milan in 286. And, in 402, in reaction to the increasingly restless Visigoths, Honorius moved it again to the virtually impregnable, swampy redoubt of Ravenna. Rome was now the home of a rapidly diminishing population and a largely ineffectual Senate. The sack of Rome was thus more symbolic than transformative. But the symbolic reverberations were great. Rome had stood untouched by invasion for almost eight hundred years, since it was taken by the Gauls in 390 BCE. Its fall, however temporary, sent shock waves as far as Hippo in North Africa, where Augustine felt compelled to counter angry accusations that Rome fell as a punishment for abandoning the pagan gods. In *The City of God*, Augustine sought to explain that the cities of man, however great,

cannot last, and that their collapse is a necessary preparation for the triumphant spread of the Catholic Church, God's kingdom on Earth.

By 410, the western empire was already beginning to crumble. The Rhine River, the dividing line between Roman territory and the northern tribes, had been decisively breached in 406. Roman troops were pulled from Britain to assist in Gaul. In 408, Angles and Saxons from Germany and Scandinavia sailed to unprotected Britain, and we know little of its history for the next two hundred years. The Visigoths moved on from Italy to settle in Spain and southern Gaul. Burgundians and Vandals, from what is now Poland, followed in the wake of the Visigoths, as did the Franks, from southern Germany. The Burgundians settled in southeast Gaul, and the Franks in northern Gaul. The Vandals crossed the Pyrenees into Spain and eventually moved over to North Africa, the breadbasket of Italy, which they conquered between 429 and 439. When Augustine died in Hippo in 430, the Vandals had already laid siege to the city. Ostrogoths (from the area around the Black Sea) moved into large portions of northern Italy. By 430, the once mighty western empire was now outside the control of its nominal emperor, who remained effectively trapped in Ravenna.

Central administration and tax gathering collapsed, and a vicious cycle ensued. When the western empire had no more money to pay the armies, those armies dissolved or joined local chieftains. Cities decayed, and power shifted to the countryside. The population of Rome collapsed from more than a million to as few as fifty thousand: the “ruralization of the West,” one historian has called it.[8] Trade routes disappeared, and economies became localized. Roman law, secular education, and shared knowledge all diminished. A mini ice age reduced crop yields and engendered famine as well as increased mobility. Ironically, peasants initially may have been better off. Freed from onerous taxation and rent payments, they were able to retain more of their surplus. But that did not last long. Eventually, they needed the protection of local strongmen, for which they paid with their freedom. Powerful landowners built their own private armies to protect themselves and those who worked their lands. Instead of small freeholders, the peasants became serfs. Local and regional blocs arose to fill the power vacuums left after the collapse of Rome. Warfare was constant as boundaries shifted and kingdoms were formed.

The most powerful of these kingdoms was that of the Franks, established by Clovis (r. 481–511). The Franks succeeded largely by colonization rather than occupation and encouraged intermarriage with the Gallo-Romans already living in Gaul. Clovis expanded the Frankish territory through wars and treaties. He was baptized in 507 to gain the support of the largely Christian populace. What became

known as the Merovingian Kingdom, after Clovis's grandfather Merovich, covered most of contemporary France and much of southwestern Germany. The Merovingians remained in power until 758. By then, France was well established as the political and intellectual center of western Europe, and it would remain so until the Renaissance.

In Italy, the last western emperor, Romulus Augustus (himself a usurper) was deposed in 476 by the German warrior Odoacer. That date is generally thought to mark the end of the western empire. But it is both too early and too late: too late, because the empire had already collapsed; too early, because nothing much changed. Odoacer, a former Roman commander, greatly respected and wished to preserve the Roman heritage. As self-proclaimed king of Italy, he cooperated with the Roman Senate and pledged nominal support to Zeno, the eastern emperor. Odoacer, an Arian Christian, was even on good terms with the pope. Under his rule, the power of Rome actually increased.

Zeno, however, viewed Odoacer as a dangerous rival. Zeno was also plagued by another German warlord, the Ostrogoth Theodoric. Hoping to solve both problems at once, Zeno promised Theodoric control of northern Italy if he defeated Odoacer. It took several years and blatant treachery, but Theodoric finally succeeded in murdering Odoacer. He then ruled Italy from Ravenna for thirty years until his death in 526. Theodoric, too, tried to work within Roman political and administrative structures, and he retained considerable loyalty among the Italian people, who favored him over the eastern emperors, and for good reason.

The eastern emperors longed to reconstitute the Roman Empire, with themselves in sole command. Constantinople was an increasingly spectacular capital. But Rome was still the historic and symbolic center of the empire. Without control of Rome and the territories long ruled from Rome, the eastern empire seemed incomplete. Justinian, who reigned from 527 to 565, launched an aggressive military campaign of reconquest.

Justinian the Great, as he is known to history, was an enigmatic figure. He was a devout Christian who required all pagans within his territory to be baptized. He persecuted heretics, particularly Monophysites, who contended that Christ had a single divine nature and was not equally God and man. Yet Justinian himself leaned increasingly toward Monophysitism as he aged. He launched an extensive restoration and building campaign, whose masterpieces in Constantinople include the haunting underground cisterns and the spectacular church of Hagia Sophia, with its massive dome. Justinian also prepared a detailed Code and a Digest of all Roman law, which, after a long hiatus, became the basis for a number of European legal

systems in the twelfth century. Yet he also closed the Platonic Academy in Athens, a symbolic shutting of the door to classical learning.

Justinian's most important and disastrous initiative began in 530. He sought to reconquer North Africa from the Vandals, Italy from the Ostrogoths, and Spain from the Visigoths. These decades-long efforts are recorded and celebrated by Procopius in his highly regarded *History of the Wars*. Yet Procopius also wrote *The Secret History*, which tells a very different story and paints a radically different portrait of his patron, Justinian. Procopius explains in the preface that he could not safely tell the truth in his earlier work while "those responsible for what happened were still alive."[9] He then delivers a fierce attack on the tyrant Justinian and his sluttish wife, Theodora, who together, Procopius claims, "destroyed the fortunes of the Roman Empire."[10] The work, with its excessive vitriol and questionable allegations, has forever damaged Procopius's reputation as a historian even as it has delighted readers. He describes Justinian as follows:

> This Emperor was dissembling, crafty, hypocritical, secretive by temperament, two-faced; a clever fellow with a marvelous ability to conceal his real opinion, and…lying all the time, not carelessly, however, but confirming his undertakings both with his signature and with the most dread oaths, even when dealing with his own subjects…. A treacherous friend and an inexorable enemy, he was passionately devoted to murder and plunder…. These vices and many yet greater he clearly possessed to an inhuman degree.[11]

If anything, Theodora is even more roughly handled, portrayed as a former circus dancer and whore with an inexhaustible appetite for self-indulgence and a penchant for group sex, who exercised a demonic control over her husband.[12]

Just how much of Procopius's exaggerated polemic can be accepted as true is unclear. Yet we must agree with his judgment on "the magnitude of the calamities" resulting from Justinian's vast ambitions.[13] Initially, Justinian enjoyed success in the Gothic Wars as a result of the genius of his main general, Belisarius, who reconquered North Africa and Sicily from the Vandals. Justinian's troops also pushed the Ostrogoths out of Ravenna. And, in 536, with the connivance of the pope, they entered Rome. The great classical cities of Carthage, Syracuse, and Rome were again joined with Athens as part of the empire, and significant portions of Spain were later added. Justinian's dreams appeared close to realization.

But it was an illusion. The Ostrogoths fought back in Italy, and Justinian had to withdraw troops from the borders at the Danube and to the east to bolster the campaigns in the west. The Persians took

advantage of this weakness to launch their own attacks. Slavs from the north poured into Greece and the Balkans. The eastern empire was further weakened in 542 by the bubonic plague, which killed one-third of the population of Constantinople. Justinian could not exercise effective control over the far-flung holdings in the west. Indeed, he barely held on to the eastern empire.

In the end, Justinian succeeded only in destroying the remnants of order in the west and thus paved the way for later conquests by Muslims in North Africa and Spain and the fierce Lombards in Italy. After decades of war, the Ostrogoth dynasty in Italy was gone, and with it the last vestiges of Roman civil government. Italy was devastated, with its cities in ruins and all centralized government collapsed into small geographic units. It was ripe for conquest when the Lombards arrived from what is now Austria in 568. The same was true in North Africa and Spain. The Vandals were defeated, but no organized government or effective fighting force took their place. Aside from his beautiful buildings and equally beautiful code of laws, all Justinian left behind him were broken institutions, huge debts, inadequate border armies, religious controversies, and a corrupt bureaucracy. His death in 565 is an appropriate marker for the end of Late Antiquity.

## THE "DARK AGES" IN EUROPE (CA. 565–CA. 1000)

Justinian's successor, Heraclius, defeated the Persians and saved Constantinople. But the exhausted Byzantine Empire did not flourish again until the ninth and tenth centuries. When Heraclius died in 641, Islam was already on the rise and ready to take advantage of the debilitating effects of the Gothic and Persian Wars.

The rapid spread of Islam is even more remarkable than that of Christianity. All three major religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—shared the same Old Testament. They were "people of the book," who claimed Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as their religious forebears. But Christ and the Prophet Muhammad took their faiths in very different directions. If anything, Christianity marks a more radical departure from the older Judaic faith than does Islam. Chapter 1 will deal in depth with the origins of Christianity and the writing of the New Testament. Islam is largely beyond the scope of this book except in its significant effects on developments in western Europe and its critical preservation of classical learning.

Muhammad was born in Mecca around 570. He had a modest

education and worked as a caravan manager for, and later married, a wealthy widow. Muhammad suffered from epilepsy, and during his fits the archangel Gabriel revealed to him the teachings of Allah, which were recorded by his followers in the Qur'an. Muhammad claimed no divine status for himself. Allah was the one and only God, and all had to submit to his will. The word *Islam* means "submission." In exchange for leading an ethical life, observing the five "pillars" of Islam,[14] and propagating his faith, the pious Muslim is promised eternal happiness. It is a strict quid pro quo in which grace plays no role.[15]

Muhammad was not just a prophet; he was a holy warrior, and he literally spread Islam at the point of a sword, first as a bandit raiding caravans and later in *jihad* against infidel Persians, Jews, and Christians. Muhammad was driven from Mecca in 622. But his *hijrah* (flight) to Medina, which marks the first year of the Islamic calendar, was reversed in 630 when he returned to Mecca in triumph. In the one hundred years following his death in 632, Islam spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, Sicily, western Italy, Spain, and southern France. Persians, Visigoths, and Vandals, debilitated by their wars with the Byzantine Empire, could not withstand the onslaught. Two key battles finally brought the expansion to a halt and changed the possible course of history. In 718, a Muslim siege of Constantinople was thwarted through a combination of a great chain placed across the Golden Horn and the use of "Greek fire," an incendiary mixture that burned even on water, against Muslim ships. And, in 732, exactly one hundred years after the death of Muhammad, Charles Martel defeated the Muslims at the Battle of Tours, driving them back across the Pyrenees to Spain, which they continued to hold until the twelfth century.

Islam itself was hardly uniform. The Umayyad (mostly Arabic) dynasty gave way to the Abbasid (mostly Persian) dynasty, and various Islamic states developed within a splintered empire. Doctrinal issues caused further divisions as orthodox (Sunni) Muslims split with Shiites (who believed the prophetic tradition continued after Muhammad through descendants of his daughter, Fatima) and Sufis (who sought a more personal, mystical union with Allah). But the Islamic world as a whole grew wealthy from agriculture and trade. Arab scholars preserved the legacy of Greek philosophy and science (particularly the writings of Aristotle) and made significant advances in mathematics and medicine. All these advances would ultimately make their way to a developing western Europe after centuries of neglect there. Islamic Spain, known as al-Andalus, remained an important cultural center in which Muslims, Jews, and Christians existed in relative harmony into the eleventh century.

With the halt of Muslim advances at Constantinople and Tours, the three major medieval power blocs west of the Indus River—Islam, the Byzantine Empire, and the western European kingdoms—also settled into an uneasy equilibrium. The Islamic world was by far the most dynamic and expansive of the three. It controlled the critical sea routes for trade in the Mediterranean. The Byzantine Empire was increasingly isolated but retained its solid core around Constantinople.

Fledgling Europe, broken into a series of minor kingdoms, was the weakest and most backward of the three cultures. The great cities of the western empire were largely abandoned, and their government buildings, temples, arenas, and theaters lay in ruins.[16] Rome alone had lost 95 percent of its population, and large areas within the city walls were now devoted to subsistence gardens. The remarkable network of Roman roads that enabled the quick movement of troops and goods was no longer maintained. Central administration, trade, and secular education all collapsed. Europe returned to a rural economy. People lived in isolated hamlets under the protection of large landowners to whom they owed rent and fealty.

Extended families crowded together into small huts clustered closely enough around the manor house to allow them to seek safety within its walls. A mill, a forge, a bakery, and stables rounded out the self-sufficient village.[17] Eighty percent of the populace never traveled more than ten miles from where they were born.[18] Malnutrition and sometimes starvation were common facts of life. Average life expectancy was only thirty years. There were no clocks or calendars, and certainly no newspapers. Literacy was uncommon. People lived and died in almost complete ignorance of the world outside their immediate village.

Only two things connected the peasant with the broader world. The first was military service. Given a state of almost constant warfare between neighboring kingdoms and principalities, the upper classes focused on military training rather than the classical education valued in the days of the Roman Senate and law courts. But the obligations of military service extended much further. Each holder of a fief—a plot of land, however small—owed military service to his lord, and the lord in turn owed service to greater lords and ultimately to whatever king or noble claimed sovereignty in the land. The time of service was supposed to be limited to forty days per year, but that limit was often breached, and young men were sometimes gone from their villages for years. *The Return of Martin Guerre*—both the book and the movie—provides a dramatic illustration of life in a medieval French village, which changed very little over time.

The other connection to something outside the village was provided by the church, the only institution that made its presence felt

throughout medieval Europe. Modeling its administrative structure on the former empire, the papacy provided a central authority, implemented at the regional level by bishops and locally by parish priests. Small churches dotted the countryside. Their bells marked the segments of the day and summoned the public to services, emergencies, and executions. Priests, if they were literate, would occasionally read papal pronouncements to the congregation. Europe may have been poor, fragmented, and backward, but the church was wealthy, reasonably cohesive, and comparatively enlightened. The church provided ceremony, ritual, and beauty to give meaning to everyday life. It played a critical role in retaining secular education and preserving the Latin language. Vulgar (popular) Latin—captured in the Vulgate of Saint Jerome—gradually evolved into the Romance languages of Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Romanian. But, for centuries, literary, scholarly, religious, and governmental writings were all in the medieval Latin of the church. Every learned man and woman was connected in one way or another to the church. The church also played a critical role in tending to the sick and the hungry, to lepers and orphans. There was no central government to undertake such tasks. Tithes and alms replaced general taxation, as the people were urged to store up their treasure in heaven rather than on Earth. They had little hope of the latter in any event.

The church evolved and expanded a great deal after 565. Germanic kings were eager to adopt the mantle of the church. Papal authority became political and monarchy divinely sanctioned. The great age of monasteries also began in this period. The remote asceticism of the desert fathers, which was possible in the warmer climate of the Middle East, was replaced by the comparative comfort of communal living devoted to God. Benedict of Monte Cassino established the basic precepts for monastic life in the sixth century, striking a balance between individual piety and the need for absolute obedience within the community. The Rule of Saint Benedict governed the work and devotions of most monks for the next six hundred years. Despite their vows of poverty, however, Benedictine monasteries grew wealthy, as kings and other patrons made generous gifts in exchange for masses and prayers. In France, the church owned one-third of all the land. Abbots were powerful figures in political and military as well as religious affairs. Most monks were sons of the nobility. Many depended on serf labor so they could devote themselves, in theory at least, to learning and religious pursuits, though hunting and military exercises were also common. The great Irish monasteries built large libraries, and the monks learned Latin so they could copy and preserve ancient works. Without the scholarly devotion of such monks, many more classics would have been lost.

Gregory the Great, pope from 590 to 604, was himself a former Benedictine monk. He sent missionaries to convert the Anglo-Saxons, who by then controlled the eastern third of Britain. The western, Celtic portions had been Christian since the days of Saint Patrick. Gregory eased the transition by directing that pagan shrines be respected and reconsecrated rather than destroyed, and that pagan customs and traditions—carried over from their German and Danish forebears—be absorbed into Christian feast days rather than abolished. By 700, Christianity was widespread on both sides of the English Channel. And, by then, through the work of the Christian fathers and various church councils, the key elements of the faith were firmly in place: the dual nature of Christ; the immortality of the soul; the salvation of that soul through the Mass and other sacraments of the church; the pope as God's representative on Earth; and an afterlife consisting of hell for the wicked, heaven for the blessed, and purgatory for those who must atone for their sins before attaining eternal bliss.

Not content to direct only the spiritual realm, however, the popes sought to exercise secular power as well. The eastern empire was by now beyond papal ambitions. So too, increasingly, was the Eastern Orthodox Church, which had split with the Roman Catholic Church over a number of theological and liturgical issues that would culminate in the Great Schism of 1054. Instead, the papacy focused on western Europe and relied on the Donation of Constantine, an imperial decree in which the emperor Constantine had supposedly granted the papacy control over Rome and the western half of the Roman Empire. The document was a forgery produced in the eighth century, but it provided a facial justification for the church's secular ambitions, and the popes made immediate use of it.

They began in France where the Merovingian dynasty was in decline. A series of weak kings had ceded land and power to the nobility. Pippin III, the son of Charles Martel, deposed the last of these Merovingian kings and ascended to the throne in 751. Pippin wanted legitimacy, and the pope wanted protection for the Papal States against the Lombards and the Byzantines. A deal was quickly struck, and the pope blessed the new, Carolingian dynasty. Pippin made good his own promise by invading northern Italy and taking Ravenna from the Lombards. He then turned it over, not to the Byzantines, who had lost it to the Lombards, but to the pope, who added it to the nascent Papal States in 756.

Despite the Donation of Constantine, the Carolingians rather than the popes held the real power in western Europe. Pippin's son, Charlemagne, devastated the Lombard kingdom in northern Italy and also added northwestern Germany to Frankish control. He pushed into

Aquitaine and Provence and even made limited inroads into Muslim Spain, celebrated in the great epic the *Song of Roland*. He had succeeded in uniting much of western Europe. Charlemagne was a brilliant tactician and fierce warrior who also promoted education, the church, and the role of government in improving the living conditions of his subjects. His court scholars ushered in what became known as the Carolingian Renaissance, based on their revival and close study of Latin literature. Charlemagne expanded and confirmed the Papal States in 781. On Christmas Day in Rome, 800, a grateful Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne as Holy Roman emperor before the tomb of Saint Peter. But he did so less to honor Charlemagne than to assert the primacy of the church over Charlemagne's growing domain and to juxtapose a Christian empire to the Islamic and Byzantine ones.

After the death of Charlemagne in 814, the empire splintered among his descendants. The Carolingian dynasty began its slow decline, weakened by poor leadership and by increasingly bold Viking raiders, who penetrated into the Loire and Seine valleys. Those same raiders assaulted the eastern coast of Britain for eighty years before the king of Wessex, Alfred the Great (r. 871–899), united the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and finally fought the Vikings to a draw.

Carolingian rulers died out in 911 in Germany and in 987 in France, when Hugh Capet, the first of the Capetian kings, assumed the throne. By then, the German monarchy had risen in importance and usurped the imperial title. Otto I, after guaranteeing the autonomy of the Papal States, was crowned emperor by the pope at Rome in 962. The Ottonian dynasty lasted almost a century. But German efforts to push into France and northern Italy met with limited success. France, England, Ireland, Upper and Lower Burgundy, northern Spain, and western Germany were now separate and often hostile states.[19] Italy itself was hopelessly splintered among the Germans, the Franks, the Byzantines, and the Papal States. The power of the popes was at a low ebb. But the West was developing its identity as Christian Europe, and 962 marks a new beginning, not an end, in the struggle between monarchs and popes that characterized so much of the Middle Ages.

## THE RISE OF EUROPE (CA. 1000–CA. 1200)

Starting in 1000, conditions began to improve. The economy throughout Europe gradually grew stronger. Rigid horse collars and harnesses made plowing the land easier and agriculture more productive. Warming weather led to a longer growing season, and the

population increased. Water mills and, later, windmills were used to grind grain, and sawmills improved the quantity and quality of lumber for building. Towns and cities were reborn, creating new markets for farmers. Artisans, bankers, and merchants formed guilds and promoted foreign trade. Venetian sailors connected with Muslim ports around the Mediterranean. Flemish wool merchants from Ghent and Ypres found their wool cloth in high demand. Even warfare was transformed, as bronze horseshoes and stirrups enabled armed knights to battle one another on horseback.

By the twelfth century, an early Renaissance was underway. The works of Aristotle became available in Latin translations, along with commentaries from Arab scholars such as Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) and Averroës (Ibn Rushd). Roman poets, historians, and philosophers were increasingly studied. Secular verse, in both Latin and the vernacular, flourished, as did the romances we will study in chapter 6. The first universities were established at Bologna (1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), and Cambridge (1209). Church music shifted gradually from plainchant to polyphony; architecture and painting from Romanesque to Gothic. The world was growing richer and more complex.

There were three major developments in the church during this period. First, the Great Schism of 1054 presaged a final split between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church centered in Constantinople. A number of issues had long distinguished the two churches, such as the nature of the Holy Spirit, the display of religious icons, and whether to use leavened or unleavened bread for the Eucharist. But the most important point of difference was the pope's claim to be the head of the church, to whom all others were subordinate. Pope Leo IX (r. 1049–1054) precipitated the final split when he ordered Greek churches in southern Italy either to close or to abide by the practices of the Latin Church. Michael Cerularius, the bishop of Constantinople and patriarch of the Eastern Church, responded by shutting the Latin churches in Constantinople. A papal legation excommunicated Cerularius when he refused to recognize the pope's supremacy.

Second, in 1075, Pope Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085) issued the *Dictatus Papae*, which asserted the doctrine of papal infallibility. As the direct representative of God on Earth, the pope and his church could not err in matters of doctrine. The *Dictatus Papae* also claimed, in keeping with the Donation of Constantine, that the pope is supreme over the emperor and has the power to depose him. Gregory's dictate included a series of reforms designed to purify the Roman church and free it from secular influence. He required celibacy among the priesthood, which, as a by-product, increased the wealth of the church in land and inheritance. Until then, parish priests regularly married

and raised families. And, although bishops and monks did not marry, they often lived openly with women and fathered children. Gregory also set up the current system whereby new popes are to be chosen exclusively by cardinals, supposedly without interference from emperors or any other secular officials. Finally, Gregory insisted that bishops and abbots should be appointed and invested with the symbols of their authority by the church, not by kings and other powerful lords. This “investiture conflict,” as it became known, festered for decades. Bishops controlled land, money, and men. Emperors and more regional monarchs did not want to give up their patronage power over those resources. Nor did they want to recognize the converse power of the church to invest their own positions with divine sanction.

The conflict came to a head in January 1077. Henry IV, the German emperor, sent a letter to Gregory in which he not only refused to relinquish his investiture power but also withdrew his support for Gregory as pope and called for the election of a new pope. Gregory responded by purporting to depose Henry. Gregory shrewdly calculated that Henry had a precarious hold on power, and, indeed, the papal deposition sparked an immediate rebellion against Henry among the lesser German nobles. To preserve his position, Henry had to give in. He traveled across the Alps to Canossa, in northern Italy, where Gregory was in residence. Gregory ordered the castle gates to be shut and refused Henry admission. For three days and two nights, Henry stood barefoot in the snow in penitent garb. Eventually, given the church's doctrine of forgiveness in the face of true penitence, Gregory had little choice but to readmit Henry to the church. Henry quickly returned to Germany to consolidate his position and deal with his erstwhile rivals so Gregory could not continue to exercise such leverage. Gregory later excommunicated Henry, and Henry in response drove the pope from Rome and into exile in southern Italy, where he soon died.

The investiture conflict was not fully resolved until 1122, when a new emperor, Henry V, and Pope Calixtus II, reached a compromise near the city of Worms, in Germany. Under the Concordat of Worms, only the church would invest bishops with spiritual authority (signified by ring and staff). But kings would invest them with secular authority (signified by a lance) and had a right to call upon them for military and administrative assistance. The separation of church and state was still far from established, however. In 1170, on oblique orders from Henry II of England, the first of the Plantagenet kings, four knights entered Canterbury Cathedral and murdered the archbishop, Thomas Becket, at the altar. Becket and the king had once been friends, but, when he became archbishop, Becket vigorously

resisted Henry's efforts to regain control of church lands and to make members of the clergy who committed secular crimes subject to his courts. Becket was quickly declared a martyr, and Canterbury Cathedral became a popular pilgrimage destination. Henry had to promise to join one of the Crusades in order to reconcile with the church, a promise he never fulfilled.

The Crusades were the third major church initiative. Pope Urban II called for the First Crusade in 1095. His announced purpose was to guarantee Christian pilgrims access to the Holy Land. But he was also seeking to enhance the power and prestige of the papacy after the Gregorian reforms and the resulting investiture controversy. He wanted to unify the Latin Church under his leadership and perhaps even to pave the way for a reconciliation with the Greek Church.

French and Italian knights responded to his call and began to organize an army. But the people responded even more quickly. Under a group of popular leaders such as Peter the Hermit, who had no military experience, the so-called Peasants', or People's, Crusade launched itself toward the Holy Land on a meandering overland route that took them along the Rhine River and down into the Balkans. They murdered Jews as they went and pillaged local communities. The eastern emperor was more than happy to transport them quickly across the Hellespont, where they were just as quickly slaughtered by the Turks.

The official First Crusade met with much greater success, though largely because Muslim resistance was fractured. In July 1099, the crusaders plundered Jerusalem amidst widespread slaughter of Jews and Muslims in the name of Christ. They established a number of Crusader states in the Holy Land. Holding on to those states was another matter. Multiple further Crusades, a total of six or more, depending on how one counts, were launched to shore up the initial conquests. But they were largely hapless, disorganized affairs, some of which never even reached the Holy Land. Jerusalem was reconquered by the Muslims in 1187, and the last of the Crusader states fell in 1291. During the Fourth Crusade, in 1204, the crusading army turned aside and sacked Constantinople. They set up a Latin administration and tried to bring the Eastern Orthodox Church under Roman control. The city returned to Byzantine rule in 1261, but the greatly weakened Byzantine Empire ceased to play a significant role in world affairs. Constantinople was ultimately taken by Ottoman Turks in 1453, the official end of the last remnant of the Roman Empire.

The Crusades had some positive effects on western Europe. They reopened the Mediterranean to trade. They helped to forge a united Roman church under the pope. They became an important source for

medieval romance and literature. And they brought philosophy and science from the Middle East to the universities and church schools of the West. In the end, however, the Crusades petered out because the monarchs of western Europe were more concerned with building and expanding their own states than with establishing a church presence in the Holy Land.

The Crusades also gave rise to anti-Semitism and pogroms, fueled by the blood libel that Jews sacrificed Christian children. Jews throughout Europe had to pay dearly for protection from their own monarchs. But often even that was not enough. The Jews were expelled from France and England, and their property was seized. The church reinforced this anti-Semitism. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome called for Jews to be confined in ghettos and to wear a yellow badge. Many moved to Germany and the Dutch provinces. Muslim Spain treated the Jews far better than Christian Europe, but the Muslims lost their hold on Spain and were themselves finally driven from Europe.

The Reconquista of Spain by Christians began in the eleventh century. A Castilian nobleman, Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (ca. 1043–1099), known as El Cid, had great success against the Muslim kingdoms in al-Andalus. But the new Spanish emperor, Alfonso VI, grew wary of his powerful warlord and exiled him in 1081. El Cid then joined forces with the Muslim rulers of the independent state of Zaragoza in northern Spain and was victorious against Christians and neighboring Muslim states alike. The chastened Alfonso prevailed on El Cid to fight once again on his behalf. El Cid did so but ended by setting up his own independent principality in eastern Spain. The Reconquista was largely complete by 1249, though Granada held out until 1492, the year Columbus landed in America. *El Cantar de mio Cid* (translated into English as *The Poem of the Cid*) is a thirteenth-century Castilian epic that recounts the exploits of El Cid.

English history, too, took a dramatic turn in the eleventh century, when William II, duke of Normandy, defeated an English army at Hastings in 1066 and claimed the throne of England. For centuries thereafter, English kings would also hold the title “Duke of Normandy” and covet all of France. The Anglo-Saxon landowning elite was quickly displaced by Norman allies of William the Conqueror. Norman French became the language of the court and the administration. Among the people, Anglo-Saxon, the Old English of *Beowulf*, steadily atrophied. In its place arose Anglo-Norman French, which would evolve into the Middle English of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. William governed his new realm with professional administrators and launched a complete inventory of the people and

their land, known as the Domesday Book, which was completed in 1086, the year before his death.

The twelfth century saw three long-reigning, powerful kings in the three most prominent states of Europe: Louis VII in France (r. 1137–1180), Henry II in England (r. 1154–1189), and Frederick Barbarossa of Germany, the Holy Roman emperor (r. 1155–1190). Many of the feuds and contentions that have plagued Europe through the centuries owe their origins to this time. Eleanor of Aquitaine, who promoted the tradition of courtly love discussed in chapter 6, was married to two of these three monarchs: first to Louis and later to Henry. Depending on the source, she divorced Louis because he was too pious, or he divorced her because she bore him no sons. Regardless, through his subsequent marriage to Eleanor, Henry not only fathered numerous sons; he also laid claim to large sections of France. But Louis's son by a second marriage, Philip Augustus (r. 1180–1223), more than evened the score during his forty-two years on the throne, strengthening the power and doubling the size of France and putting it on at least an equal footing with England and Germany. Urged on by Eleanor, Henry's own sons, including his ultimate heir Richard the Lionheart, rebelled against him. The rebellion failed, and Eleanor was confined to her palace for sixteen years until Henry died and Richard became king.

Italy in the twelfth century was still a splintered mess, a collection of independent, frequently warring city-states caught between allegiance to the pope (the Guelphs) and the German emperor (the Ghibellines), but really more focused on local squabbles over power. Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Pisa took their inspiration from republican Rome. There were also principalities in Benevento, Capua, and Salerno, as well as duchies in Milan, Spoleto, and Amalfi. The kingdom of Lombardy in northern Italy, the Papal States in central Italy, and the kingdom of Naples in southern Italy rounded out the picture. Out of this constant tension would arise the tremendous energy of the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, which placed Italy once again at the center of European cultural life.

## THE LATE MIDDLE AGES (CA. 1200–CA. 1400)

By the thirteenth century, all the elements commonly associated with the late Middle Ages were in place: fortified castles; armored knights on horseback; ladies in flowing tunics, tight in the waist and bodice; pages and squires; peasants in billowing blouses, wielding scythes and

drinking mead; fat, jolly monks in brown robes; the codes of chivalry and courtly love; dark, low-ceilinged taverns; colorful trade fairs; and pageant-filled tournaments—the sorts of things lampooned in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*.

The late Middle Ages, so conceived, is a mostly literary creation. But, as with all great literary creations, it starts with elements of truth, and then life tries to imitate art. Chapters 5 through 10 discuss this period in detail: the secular love poetry; the Arthurian romances; the mendicant friars; the intricacies of church doctrine; and the gradual evolution in Dante, Boccaccio, and Chaucer of that greatest and most important of all oxymorons, realistic fiction.

It was a time of dynamic change in every aspect of life and culture. Imagine how much a single invention, the mechanical clock, altered the perception of time for those fortunate—or perhaps unfortunate—enough to own one. Hitherto, the transition points of the day—of varying length depending on the season—were marked only by church bells. Now, constant units of time measured day and night and held people in their iron grip. Glass windows appeared in houses, and eyeglasses (adopted from the Arabs) brought the world into focus for those who had grown nearsighted mending and sewing through long winter nights in dimly lit rooms. Spinning wheels sped the production of thread and yarn. Cotton fabric was manufactured in Spain. Coal was mined in England for fuel. Hats came into fashion, as did quill pens. Arabic numbers facilitated commerce and transformed mathematics. New roads connected cities and towns. The compass and fixed rudder made sea travel easier and safer. Marco Polo's travels to China and Central Asia inspired frenzied interest in Eastern goods and spices. The merchant class rapidly increased in wealth and pressed for more autonomy and power. The old system of three estates—nobles, priests, and commoners—was breaking down. Lawyers and professional administrators began to proliferate and establish rules for commercial and personal interactions. Middle-class bureaucrats grew commonplace. Longbowmen and sturdy yeomen armed with pikes began to render heavily armed knights an irrelevancy, just as those knights were increasingly celebrated in literature.

Schools associated with cathedrals taught the seven liberal arts, divided into the Trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, and the Quadrivium of mathematics, geometry, music, and astronomy. The universities for higher education, which grew out of these cathedral schools, offered increasingly secular options in law, philosophy, and science. Roman law, preserved by Justinian, became a model for legal systems throughout Europe. Eager students pored over the legal and rhetorical works of Cicero, hoping to join the new civil service. The

works of Aristotle on metaphysics, ethics, and the sciences were translated into Latin. Scholars such as Duns Scotus, Meister Eckhart, and William of Ockham developed their logical, philosophical, and theological systems under the watchful and sometimes alarmed eyes of the church. Troubadour poets spread out from the court of Eleanor of Aquitaine singing their Provençal love songs. National epics such as the *Song of Roland* in France and the *Nibelungenlied* in Germany vied for audiences with the new French *romans d'aventure* and German romances such as *Tristan* by Gottfried von Strassburg and *Parzival* by Wolfram von Eschenbach. The two great geniuses of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—Thomas Aquinas and Dante Alighieri—developed their medieval syntheses just as the medieval world was disappearing.

The thirteenth century was the time of the "long peace." The Anglo-French War, which began in 1202, ended badly for England. Philip Augustus gained control over Normandy and decisively defeated King John and his allies at the Battle of Bouvines in 1214. From 1214 to 1294, there was no major war in western Europe, a respite of eighty years during which material and cultural life alike could blossom.[20] In England, the weakened and humiliated John was forced by his barons to sign the Magna Carta in 1215 at Runnymede. Although the document primarily guaranteed the rights of the nobility, it also provided that even the king was bound by the rule of law and that even the lowliest might seek its protection: "No free man shall be taken, or imprisoned, or deprived of his land, or outlawed, or exiled or in any other way destroyed," the king promised, "nor shall we go against him or send against him except by legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land."[21] The Magna Carta provided a foundation for the common law, one of England's most important contributions to the resolution of disputes in a fair and just society.

The church, too, was evolving during this period. Saint Francis of Assisi (1181/2–1226) and Saint Dominic of Spain (ca. 1170–1221) established new orders of mendicant friars, dedicated to poverty and service and, in the case of the Dominicans, to learning. Unfortunately, Pope Innocent III's promotion of the mendicant orders was not wholly innocent. He deployed them like shock troops to extend the power and influence of Rome where civic power was still isolated and dispersed. Dominicans played a key role in the Albigensian Crusade (1209–1229) to stamp out an upsurge of gnostic heresy in the south of France, according to which God and Satan were equal and opposite forces. And, when a papal inquisition was established by Pope Gregory IX in 1233, the church drew heavily on Dominican and Franciscan monks to examine and punish a wider variety of heretics and nonbelievers.[22] In just a few short years, the two orders had strayed far from their

origins and the teachings of their founders. They were now an integral part of the church's vision of a Christian Europe in which all the separate nation-states were united under the guidance and control of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

The church itself was hardly united, however. In 1294, after a two-year impasse among factions, the desperate, hopelessly divided cardinals settled on Pietro da Morrone as pope. This was the last of the non-"conclave" elections for pope. In all future elections, the cardinals would be locked in a room and protected from outside influences until a new pope was chosen. Pietro da Morrone, or Peter the Hermit, as he was known, was a devout, ascetic monk who wanted nothing to do with the job. He tried to flee but was tracked down and persuaded to accept by a deputation of cardinals that also included the king of Naples. Celestine V, the name Pietro took as pope, lived in a monk's cell constructed within the papal apartments in Naples. Cardinal Caetani, bitterly disappointed that he was not himself chosen as pope, tried to persuade Celestine to resign, even, it is rumored, calling to Celestine through a speaking tube as he slept: "Celestine, this is an angel of the Lord. You must resign the papacy and return to your hermitage."[23] Resign he did, after only five months. Caetani had his wish and became one of the most reviled popes in history, Boniface VIII (r. 1294–1303). Dante so detested Boniface that he set a place for him—prematurely, since, based on the internal dating of the *Commedia*, Boniface wasn't even dead yet—in the eighth circle of hell among those who prostituted the church for material gain.

Boniface fought ferociously to restore the secular power and influence of earlier popes, freely wielding the weapons of excommunication and interdiction,[24] and forging military alliances with foreign monarchs. But his machinations, though disruptive and destructive, were not effective in restoring the papal supremacy asserted in the *Dictatus Papae*. Monarchs in England and France taxed the clergy to fund their wars against one another. When Boniface resisted, an infuriated Philip IV of France sent an army to seize him. The badly manhandled pope was released three days later but was dead within the month. After 1309, the popes themselves resided in France, at Avignon, under the protection and control of the French crown. They stayed there, in what was dubbed by Petrarch as the "Babylonian Captivity," until 1377, when Gregory XI returned to Rome, only to die shortly thereafter. After an Italian successor, Urban VI, was chosen, the infuriated French cardinals chose their own pope, who continued to reside in Avignon. The two popes made their own alliances and launched excommunications and interdictions at one another like dueling wizards in a Harry Potter novel. This "Western Schism" was a low point for the church and was not resolved until

1417, when the Council of Constance decreed the French conclave invalid and the Avignon line of successors to be antipopes. Yet the antipopes persisted for another twenty years.

The Western Schism is only one of the reasons Barbara Tuchman subtitled her book "The Calamitous 14th Century." The peace, progress, and relative prosperity of the thirteenth century came to an abrupt halt. Sustained bad weather and repeated crop failures led to the Great Famine of 1315–1317, which ended or stunted millions of lives. The Black Death swept into western Europe from Central Asia, killing one-third or more of the remaining population from 1346 to 1353, and returning periodically thereafter. The unsatisfied lust of English kings for the throne and territories of France led to the Hundred Years' War, which began in 1337. Although the fighting was intermittent, it was intense. Despite dramatic English victories, led by archers, at Crécy (1346) and Poitiers (1356), the English still could not gain their final objective, though Henry V came tantalizingly close after Agincourt (1415). The tide turned when the young Joan of Arc lifted the English siege of Orléans in 1429 and enabled the dauphin to be crowned Charles VII at Rheims. The English captured and burned Joan as a witch in 1431, and the war officially continued until 1453. But English pretensions to France had been dealt a death blow by the Maid of Orléans.

In England itself, turmoil ruled. The Peasants' Revolt swept violently across large portions of England and into London in 1381. Although ultimately unsuccessful—Wat Tyler and other leaders were killed and the rebellion suppressed—the revolt marked a fitting end to the era of feudalism. The causes of the revolt were various. Heavy taxation to fund the Hundred Years' War was certainly a prime grievance. But social and political factors were more prominent. Peasant labor was in great demand after the ravages of the Black Death, and Parliament tried to keep wages from rising and to restrict mobility. Yet the so-called Peasants' Revolt was not limited to the rural poor. It embraced a much broader cross section of town and country. A rapidly growing middle class of merchants, artisans, and skilled laborers wanted more economic freedom, more social recognition, and more political power. And they were prepared to fight and die for those advances.

The last major Crusade ended in 1396, with the slaughter of Christian knights by the Turks at the Battle of Nicopolis. And the divine right of kings suffered a setback when the feckless and sometimes hapless Richard II was deposed in 1399 by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke. Bolingbroke took the throne as Henry IV, and the imprisoned Richard was starved to death, undoubtedly on Henry's orders, the following year. The history plays of Shakespeare would

have their greatest subjects, and England would fall victim to the Wars of the Roses between rival Plantagenet branches, York and Lancaster, in the fifteenth century. But all that lies ahead. As the fourteenth century came to a close, the outlook must have looked bleak indeed.

## TEN MEDIEVAL AUTHORS

By the criteria applied in this series—works that enrich our lives through their intellectual distinction, beauty of expression, and implicit or explicit wisdom—my choices among medieval authors and works were, for the most part, straightforward. The **New Testament**, written in the first century, is obviously a product of antiquity. But, as the foundational work of Christianity, it is essential for any study of the Middle Ages. It gives us, so to speak, a running start. The two most important thinkers of Late Antiquity, **Augustine** (354–430) and **Boethius** (ca. 480–524), made critical efforts to preserve classical thought within the confines of the new, rapidly spreading religion. Their works—*Confessions*, *The City of God*, and *The Consolation of Philosophy*—were studied and read throughout the Middle Ages and exercised an enormous influence on subsequent writers. Ambrose (ca. 340–397), Jerome (ca. 347–420), and Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) were also important church fathers but, aside from Jerome's Vulgate, left us no works of comparable importance. The Neoplatonism of Plotinus (204/5–270) and his many followers played a critical role in shaping Christianity but is considered here only for its influence on Augustine, Boethius, and others rather than as a stand-alone movement. Cassiodorus (ca. 490–ca. 585), although he played a pivotal role in shaping medieval education around the Trivium and the Quadrivium and in urging monasteries to preserve classical works, is omitted here because his extant works are unlikely to interest anyone but a specialist in the period.

***Beowulf***, written by an unknown author circa 800, is our sole work from the so-called Dark Ages. It is also the greatest extant poem in the Anglo-Saxon language, known to us as Old English. It is an epic of tremendous power and compressed wisdom in the heroic tradition. There are other important works from this period. The *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* of the Venerable Bede (672–735), which extends from the invasion of Julius Caesar to his present day, has justly earned him the title of “father of English history.” But the need for selection has relegated him to a brief discussion in the chapter on *Beowulf*. The same is true for Gregory of Tours (ca. 538–593/4),

whose *History of the Franks* is a critical source for the study of the transition of Roman Gaul to the Merovingian state.

Many works of the early Middle Ages, like those of antiquity, have been lost. Many voices are therefore unheard. Starting in the twelfth century, expanded literacy and a greater abundance of surviving works might seem to make the selection of authors and books more difficult. But, in fact, it does not. The letters of **Abelard** (ca. 1079–1142) and **Heloise** (ca. 1100–1164); the French national epic the ***Song of Roland*** (ca. 1100); and the Arthurian romances of **Chrétien de Troyes** (1130–1191) played a critical role in the development of human consciousness and human relationships. Harold Bloom provocatively credits Shakespeare with "the invention of the human."[25] But much of the spadework was in fact done during the twelfth century by these authors. Other works could have been included: the secular love poetry of the troubadours collected in the *Carmina Burana*; the German national epic the *Nibelungenlied*; German romances such as *Tristan* or *Parzival*; French works such as *The Art of Courtly Love* by Andreas Capellanus or the *Romance of the Rose*, a work begun by Guillaume de Lorris and later finished by Jean de Meun; or, somewhat later, the epic *Poem of the Cid*, or romances such as *Aucassin and Nicolette* or *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, both by unknown authors. Yet none of these works speak to a modern audience with quite the same power as those discussed in this book.

As we proceed to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the choices are, if anything, even clearer. **Francis of Assisi** (1181/2–1226) and **Thomas Aquinas** (1224/5–1274) played pivotal roles in shaping religious thought in a way that still exercises a powerful hold on believers and nonbelievers alike. **Dante** (1265–1321) and **Boccaccio** (1313–1375), along with Petrarch (1304–1374), are considered the three crowns of Italian literature. Their place in Western literature more generally is secure. I have reserved Petrarch to begin my next book, on the Renaissance. His classical scholarship and lyric poetry are best viewed in the context of what follows, whereas Dante and Boccaccio are more properly seen as late medieval.

**Chaucer** (ca. 1343–1400) is a genius in his own right as well as the father of English poetry. Without Chaucer, Shakespeare is inconceivable. The only other fourteenth-century works of significance —the *Chronicles* of Jean Froissart (ca. 1337–ca. 1405) and *Piers Plowman*, an allegorical poem attributed to William Langland (ca. 1332–ca. 1386)—are, despite their undeniable merits, of largely historical interest.

Readers new to medieval history may find the abbreviated chronology at the back of the book useful in placing authors and events in context.

## Chapter 1

# THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE INVENTION OF CHRISTIANITY

Christianity provided the moral and intellectual framework within which the medieval search for wisdom in western Europe was conducted. It became a monolithic framework, though neither as rigid nor as intolerant of pagan ideas as is often supposed. Yet the rise of Christianity was built on multiple layers of happenstance and irony. Jesus was an obscure and illiterate Jewish prophet from the tiny rural village of Nazareth who preached the repentance of sins and the fulfillment of the Hebrew scriptures. His disciples were Jewish. His target audience, with rare exceptions, was Jewish. Some thought he was the promised Messiah—the new King David—who would drive out the pagan Roman oppressors and, with God's direct intervention, reestablish a Jewish kingdom and restore the lost tribes of Israel. Jesus himself preached an apocalyptic vision derived from John the Baptist—he thought the end of the known world was near and that God would soon come in all his glory to punish the wicked and reward the pious. Jesus presented himself as God's last messenger before the coming day of judgment.

None of this came to pass, of course. No Jewish kingdom was established, the end of the world did not come, and neither the wicked were punished nor the good exalted. When Jesus created a disturbance at the Temple in Jerusalem, the worried high priest, responsible for maintaining good order, turned Jesus over to the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, who responded quickly and brutally. Jesus was crucified for pretending to be—or perhaps just because others acclaimed him as—the King of the Jews. The crucifixion itself attracted little notice. It was a common occurrence; two other

perceived troublemakers were crucified with Jesus that same day. Jesus posed no real threat, as evidenced by the fact that Pontius Pilate did not even bother to move against his followers. But wild talk and public demonstrations were enough to warrant maximum punishment, particularly during the festival of Passover, when Jerusalem was filled with restless pilgrims reasserting their identity as the chosen people of God.

The Jews of Jerusalem quickly lost interest in Jesus despite the vigorous efforts of his brother James and various disciples. For them, the notion of a crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms. Jesus's death on the cross was, in itself, sufficient proof that his message was false, notwithstanding claims about his subsequent resurrection. The Jews of Jerusalem went back to waiting for their true Messiah, the successor of King David, who would restore the Jewish people to prominence and autonomy. Some forty years later, an attempted revolt led by a Jewish nationalist sect known as the Zealots enjoyed some initial success. But it ended in the devastation of Jerusalem and the destruction of its Temple by the Romans, an event that, remarkably enough, Jesus appears to have predicted, though he thought it was God who would destroy the then-current Temple and rebuild it as the centerpiece of his kingdom on Earth.

The disciples had somewhat more success spreading the words and deeds of Jesus among the Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora who were scattered throughout the Mediterranean. Eventually, however, it was among the Gentiles—that is, the non-Israelite peoples—of the Roman Empire that his message took hold. The disciples adapted his words to fit the new audience. A spiritual kingdom of heaven for all persons began to displace prophecies of the imminent, earthly, Jewish one that was anathema to Rome. Tales of Jesus's miracles grew, and his resurrection became the central event that transformed the death on the cross from a punishment for sedition into a victory over death and a symbol of atonement for the sins of humankind. The story of his resurrection transformed Jesus himself from a Nazarene peasant, with no pretentions beyond carrying God's message to his chosen people, into the divine Christ, true God and true man, one in being with the Father.

Saul of Tarsus, a Jew and self-confessed persecutor of the early Christians, was the man most responsible for this transformation. Following his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, the newly christened Paul proselytized tirelessly among the Gentiles and divorced the message of Christ from the laws of the Hebrew scriptures. Jesus himself said he came to fulfill the scriptures, not to challenge or change them. But Paul absolved Gentile adherents from circumcision, temple sacrifice, dietary restrictions, and other

requirements of the Jewish faith. Paul had little interest in the historical Jesus; his writings, or those attributed to him—which are the earliest in the New Testament and comprise thirteen of its twenty-seven books—celebrate the theological construction that is the risen Christ.

Gradually, a new religion was created rather than an ancient one fulfilled. The gospels themselves were written from thirty to seventy years after the death of Jesus by people who did not know him directly but relied on frequently repeated oral accounts and other, now lost sources. Jesus preached in Aramaic. The gospels were written in Greek. The new Christians retained the Old Testament and claimed it as their own—somewhat as Rome clung to the myth that it owed its origins to ancient Troy. A massive effort was even undertaken to find passages in the Old Testament that were fulfilled in Jesus. Accounts of Jesus's life (such as the birth in Bethlehem and the flight into Egypt) were then reshaped based not on history but on theology.

But the Old and New Testaments—with their very different Gods and very different messages—rest uneasily between the covers of the same volume. In an important sense, Christianity merged together Hebrew and Greek, Jerusalem and Athens. Both the Jewish and classical traditions have been vitally important to Western culture.[1] But the God-Man of the New Testament is antithetical to traditional Jewish religion. As Christianity spread, it was increasingly divorced from its Jewish origins and, indeed, even became hostile to those origins. As one recent writer has properly noted, “the more the movement was shaped by these new ‘pagan’ converts, the more forcefully it discarded its Jewish past for a Graeco-Roman future.”[2] It is one of the deepest and most painful ironies of history that the Jewish liberation movement begun by Jesus was gradually transformed into one with anti-Semitic undertones.

Another irony, less painful but equally deep, is that Jesus's movement ultimately succeeded in its political aims. It is not quite accurate to say that Jesus's message was a political rather than a religious one, for in his mind politics and religion were fused in the kingdom of God to be established on Earth. But it is fair to say that the political component of Jesus's message was gradually, if incompletely, filtered out of the gospels so as not to be seen as posing any threat to Rome. And yet, of course, this purely religious and moral message ultimately had its political result. Following the collapse of pagan Rome, the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church became the dominant institution in the Western world—politically, culturally, and intellectually—throughout the Middle Ages.

## GOD'S CHOSEN PEOPLE

To understand what was unique about Christianity, it is necessary to begin with the stories and beliefs that shaped Judaism. The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus was born in 37 CE. While living in Rome, under the patronage of the emperor Vespasian and his sons, Titus and Domitian, he undertook a massive twenty-volume history of the Jews from the creation of the world to 66 CE. An earlier work, *The Jewish War*, covered the disastrous rebellion against Rome in 67, in which Josephus participated and which ended in the destruction of Jerusalem. As with Livy's history of Rome's origins, many of the early chapters in Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities* are necessarily the stuff of myth rather than of history. But the work is still a vital and fascinating source for those wishing to have a coherent, consecutive account of the period covered in the Old Testament. In *Jewish Antiquities*, myth slides into history around 1000 BCE, when King David united twelve Semitic tribes in the area of Palestine, which then encompassed what is now Israel and Palestine as well as much of Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. This was the land promised to the Jews by God in a sacred covenant. The journey of some of the Israelite tribes out of Egypt to this land is told in Exodus, the second book of the Torah, otherwise known as the Pentateuch, or the Five Books of Moses. The Torah is the most sacred portion of the Hebrew scriptures.

David was a warrior king who vanquished the enemies of the Israelites, including, of course, the Philistines and their most powerful fighter, Goliath. His son Solomon reigned after him and built the famous Temple in Jerusalem, whose innermost sanctum, the Holy of Holies, housed the Ark of the Covenant, which in turn held the Ten Commandments given by God directly to Moses on Mount Sinai. After Solomon's death, the land was divided among the tribes, with ten forming a northern kingdom (Israel) and two others a southern kingdom (Judah). The two kingdoms coexisted, and each maintained its autonomy until 721, when the Assyrians conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. The ten tribes of the northern kingdom were displaced from the land and deported by the Assyrians. Thus began the great Diaspora of Jews throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean. The southern kingdom lasted another 135 years before it too was conquered, this time by the Babylonians, in 587–586. The Babylonians did not drive out the people of Judah, but they did destroy the Temple built by Solomon, and they kept Jewish leaders in captivity in Babylon as guarantors against unrest.

The Babylonians were displaced by the Persians in 539. Those Jews in captivity in Babylon were allowed to return to Judah.

Jerusalem and its Temple were rebuilt. But the ten tribes deported by the Assyrians had long since been scattered, and they disappeared from history even as they entered the realm of legend as the "lost tribes of Israel."

Alexander the Great and his Macedonians overthrew the Persian Empire in 331. On Alexander's untimely death in 323, his own empire was split into pieces, and the Ptolemies ruled over Palestine as well as Egypt. The Ptolemies permitted some level of self-governance, and the high priest of the Temple combined religious and political duties. The Seleucid ruler in Syria, Antiochus the Great, took Palestine from the Ptolemies in 198. The reign of the Seleucids in Palestine proved to be short-lived, however. They tried to repress the Jewish religion. A group known as the Maccabees began a revolt in 167 and finally succeeded in expelling the Seleucids in 142.

Palestine was once again a free state. It was ruled by Jewish kings from the Hasmonean family for almost eighty years. But two Hasmonean heirs, vying for control, each made the mistake of appealing to Rome for assistance. Rome, in the person of Pompey the Great, solved the dispute by conquering Palestine and making it a Roman protectorate in 63 BCE. The Romans ruled with a relatively light touch. As long as peace was maintained and the Jews paid their taxes, the interests of the local ruling class were also protected. Local rulers were thus highly invested in maintaining the status quo. Rome also left the Jewish religion alone and did not require the Jews to worship the emperor as a god (although Caligula had planned to try before his reign was cut short by assassination).

In 40 BCE, Herod the Great was appointed king by the Romans. He ruled with an iron fist and even executed three of his own sons on suspicion of treason. He also engaged in massive building projects. The projects provided full employment in Jerusalem for the thirty-six years he reigned, but the taxes required to fund them made him highly unpopular. On his death, Palestine was again split in two. Judea was ruled by Herod Archelaus; Galilee and neighboring Perea, by Herod Antipas. Archelaus had difficulty controlling the restive populace of Judea and was deposed by the Romans in 6 CE. Judea thereafter was overseen by Roman prefects, the most infamous of whom was Pontius Pilate, who governed there from 26 to 36. Antipas was more successful and stayed in power until 39.

In the first century CE, Jews made up more than 8 percent of the Roman Empire's population of 60 million. Due to the Diaspora, however, the majority of them were scattered far and wide around the Mediterranean. Synagogues sprang up wherever these Jewish communities gathered. Outside of Palestine, most Jews spoke *koinē* (or "common") Greek, a simplified, transregional version of the Greek

language spoken and written during the Hellenistic period. A translation of the Old Testament, known as the Septuagint, was made into *koinē* Greek sometime in the third century BCE. Thus, these Jewish communities had their own sacred text. In Palestine, the original Hebrew scriptures were largely the preserve of priests and scholars. The common people spoke Aramaic and had their own translation of the Bible. But the overwhelming majority were illiterate and thus relied upon the priestly class to deliver the words of God to them.

There was a strong messianic tradition among the Jews of Palestine, who steadfastly believed that their history had a purpose and revealed God's will. God would send a Messiah to deliver his children from evil and restore and unite the lost tribes of Israel. This Messiah, the heir and successor of David, would drive out foreign oppressors and reestablish a Jewish kingdom devoted to and protected by God. The land had been promised to the Jewish people by God, and God would ensure their possession of it in the end. God is the one God of all people, but his chosen people are the people of Israel, with whom he had established his covenant.

Yet it was impossible to deny that the Messiah had not yet come and that the Jewish kingdom was still an expectation rather than a reality. The only way to account for this disappointing delay was that the Jews had violated their covenant with God and had incurred his displeasure. The Jews concluded that they had not been faithful to his commandments or to the laws set forth in the Torah. Accordingly, they sought to repent and return to strict compliance with the scriptures in order to restore their special relationship with God.

For the Jews of Palestine, the center of ritual compliance was the magnificent Temple in Jerusalem. Jews throughout Palestine would gather there on festivals such as Passover and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). After undergoing as much as a week of ritual cleansing, they would offer a sacrifice to God. The Temple was a virtual slaughterhouse for bird and beast alike, with special drains to capture the blood, and the priests were skilled butchers. There were also money changers to transform various currencies into coins without images that were appropriate for Temple use. With these coins, visitors would buy the animals to be sacrificed and pay their half-shekel Temple tax. Wealthier visitors would donate gold. The Temple grew ever richer and periodically proved an inviting target for foreign looters and scolding prophets.

Sacrifices were made in the innermost courtyard of the Temple, where only male Jews were permitted. The Ark of the Covenant was long gone by the first century CE, presumably destroyed or carried off by the Babylonians; it, too, entered the realm of legend, to reappear as

a plot device in the 1981 film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The Holy of Holies stood empty, though God himself was believed to be present there. The Holy of Holies was shrouded from view by a curtain. Only the high priest could enter, and then only once a year on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year when the faithful atoned for their sins. The curtain was drawn back, and the high priest entered with a rope tied around his waist so that, if he were struck down by an angry God, he could be pulled from the sanctuary without anyone else having to enter.

Through eight centuries of oppression and foreign occupation, with only brief glimpses of freedom, the Jews maintained their faith in an earthly kingdom for the nation of Israel. As a result, there was a constantly simmering resistance movement during the years of the Roman occupation. Many claimed to be prophets and leaders of a new order who would expel the Romans and rebuild the kingdom of David. Some of them allegedly worked miracles, including curing the sick, casting out demons, and even multiplying loaves of bread to feed the hungry. Standard oral stories spread about such figures. But, in the end, they all proved a disappointment, for the kingdom of Israel did not come. Apollonius of Tyana was one such prophet thought by many to be the promised Messiah. Some of his followers even claimed that he was resurrected after his death and ascended to heaven. But, for whatever reason, the stories did not take and Apollonius became a minor footnote in history. The Jews of Palestine continued to await the true Messiah.

## THE HISTORICAL JESUS

From Ernest Renan's *Life of Jesus* and Albert Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* to contemporary biographies such as Bart Ehrman's *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, E. P. Sanders's *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, and Reza Aslan's recent bestseller, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth*, scholars and popularizers alike have made valiant efforts to recover the historical Jesus from the theological overlay of the New Testament. The results—like those of scholars striving to reconstruct the world of Odysseus or to date Shakespeare's plays—generally are convincing only to the author.

There are no contemporary written accounts of Jesus. Among historians writing in the later first and early second centuries, including Josephus, Tacitus, and Suetonius, Jesus warrants barely a mention. The New Testament books themselves were all written

decades after the death of Jesus by people who—though they might claim a spiritual acquaintance with the risen Christ—had never walked with the man Jesus. It is unlikely they even spoke the same language, since the New Testament books were written in Greek, whereas Jesus spoke Aramaic, as I mentioned earlier. At best, these authors relied either on oral stories about Jesus that were translated and handed down from person to person or on some earlier, now lost accounts of his life and teachings. The New Testament books—and the other gospels that survive but did not make it into the official canon—are religious documents written for religious purposes. To construct any "biography" of Jesus from these sources requires tendentious canons of textual criticism, a liberal application of historical background knowledge to fill in blanks and to help distinguish the plausible from the implausible, and ideological presuppositions that lend coherence to the portrait. Much that is presented as fact is simply guesswork. Reza Aslan is forthright about this difficulty: "The task is somewhat akin to putting together a massive puzzle with only a few of the pieces in hand; one has no choice but to fill in the rest of the puzzle based on the best, most educated guess of what the completed image should look like."[3]

Many—particularly those who view the New Testament as divinely inspired—might question the value of the whole enterprise or view it as sacrilegious. But, even from a religious perspective, in which Christ/Jesus is fully God and fully man, a biography of the man Jesus should be of the utmost value. Indeed, the Gnostics were persecuted for the heresy of believing that Christ was wholly God and not man at all. According to the church, Jesus had a life on Earth, which means it is the job of historians to separate fact from fiction as best they can. And, frankly, if God authored the New Testament, he needed a good editor, for the books are full of well-documented contradictions and inconsistencies about the life and activities of Jesus.[4]

The enterprise of reconstructing the historical Jesus, however difficult and controversial, is still essential to understanding the development and spread of Christianity and what it meant to its earliest adherents. Moreover, it is possible to present a bare-bones account of his life that enjoys general, if not total, scholarly acceptance. From there, one can better understand the New Testament transition from Jesus to Christ and hence the intellectual and spiritual foundations of Christianity and the Middle Ages.

Jesus was born around 4 BCE in the tiny, primitive, agricultural village of Nazareth in lower Galilee. His mother had become pregnant out of wedlock, but her fiancé, Joseph, married her regardless, and they went on to have many more children. We know of four younger

brothers—James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas—and at least two sisters, who are mentioned but not named in the gospels. Jesus was almost certainly illiterate. Literacy was extremely rare at that time, particularly among the peasant class. Jesus might have learned snatches of Hebrew from occasional visits to the synagogues in Sepphoris, but his knowledge of the scriptures, which was considerable, was gained by hearing passages recited in an Aramaic translation.

Jesus worked as an artisan, possibly a carpenter, which would have required him to move from village to village and town to town to find work. But we know little of his life until his early thirties, and it is fruitless to speculate about his activities before then. Some scholars suggest he must have married, given the social mores of his time and place. But there is no such indication in any of our sources.

The first thing we can say with confidence is that, around the age of thirty, he met John the Baptist. All four gospels attest to this encounter, and there is no reason to doubt it. John was a prophet in the apocalyptic tradition of the Old Testament. He wore clothes of coarse wool and dined on locusts and honey. He preached that the end of history and the kingdom of God were at hand. His prophecy was a mixed message of destruction and salvation. God will overthrow evil, reestablish his chosen people in Israel, and introduce a reign of eternal peace. John urged repentance in the face of this imminent day of judgment upon which sinners would be condemned and the good exalted. He baptized his followers, not as a sacrament sanctioned by the established church, but rather as a symbolic cleansing, a mark of repentance, and a commitment to a better life.

Antipas, the son of Herod (and sometimes himself called Herod in the Gospels), governed Galilee. By keeping the peace, Antipas was able to reign without significant Roman interference. Neighboring Judea was more turbulent and hence subject to a Roman prefect. Antipas feared the growing popularity of John the Baptist and his revolutionary message. He also had a more personal ground for resentment. John had publicly condemned the marriage of Antipas and his half niece Herodias as contrary to the Torah. Antipas had him arrested and thrown in prison. Whether the dance of the seven veils reputedly performed by Herodias's daughter Salome played any part in Antipas's final decision to behead John is unclear, but it certainly makes for a vivid story, and the history of art and opera would be poorer without it.

Jesus was deeply moved by the preaching of John the Baptist. Following his baptism, Jesus spent time fasting and praying in the desert, preparing himself for his own ministry. According to the

Gospel of Mark, echoed by Matthew and Luke, this interlude lasted forty days—an important symbolic number in the Hebrew scriptures (Noah's flood came from rains lasting forty days and forty nights; the Jewish people spent forty years wandering in the desert after their exodus from Egypt; and Moses spent forty nights on Mount Sinai awaiting the commandments from God). As with many details in the gospels that find parallels in the Old Testament, however, whether Jesus chose to stay for forty days to create this symbolism or whether it was invented by the gospel writers is unknown and probably unknowable.

After the sojourn in the desert, Jesus began his life as an itinerant preacher with the same apocalyptic message as John the Baptist. He presented himself as the harbinger of God's kingdom on Earth, as the last in a line of prophets before the day of judgment. “Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power.”[5] Yet—contrary to the thrust of some recent books, which stress only his apocalyptic message—there was far more to his teaching than that. The gospels portray John as simply a precursor of Jesus, and in many respects that is true. Jesus preached a dramatic shift in the focus of the Jewish religion. Jesus taught that there were only two genuine commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. He brushed aside the complicated dietary laws, Sabbath restrictions, and ritualized animal sacrifices at the Temple as inappropriate means of worshiping God and securing his favor. Jesus instead asked his followers to undergo an inner transformation, a spiritual rebirth. He ministered to the poor and the sick. He consorted with sinners, tax collectors, and prostitutes, all with a view to bringing them within the kingdom of heaven. He preached that the last would become first, and the first would become last. He said repeatedly that he came to fulfill the scriptures, not to overthrow them—to purify an ancient religion, not to found a new one—but his message of a direct, spiritual relationship with God, his condemnation of wealth, and his urgent prophecy of the coming kingdom were antithetical to the priestly, ruling class that found itself so comfortable under Roman rule.

Jesus preached to Jewish peasants in the towns and villages of Galilee. He had little success in Nazareth; he was a prophet without honor in the village of his birth, where the villagers knew him as the son of Mary and Joseph and could not accept him as God's messenger. But elsewhere, he developed a loyal following. He was reputed to have performed all the standard miracles—curing the sick, casting out demons, calming storms at sea, multiplying loaves, and even walking on water and raising the dead. It is impossible to know how many of

these stories circulated during his lifetime and how many were added by later writers. But crowds began to appear wherever he stopped to preach. He was obviously charismatic; at a word, his chosen disciples dropped whatever they were doing, abandoned their occupations and their families, and followed him. Jesus chose twelve such disciples, symbolic of the twelve original tribes of Israel. He said that, on the day of judgment, each of the miraculously restored tribes would be ruled by one of these disciples.

In 30 CE, Jesus and his followers left the small towns and villages of Galilee and traveled to Jerusalem for the festival of Passover. Jesus was ready for a bigger stage: “he set his face to go to Jerusalem.”[6] In preparation for Passover, large crowds made the pilgrimage. They began to gather a week before the holiday itself to go through a ritual purification at the Temple. The Roman soldiers increased their presence in the city and were on the alert for any disturbance that might turn into a riot or revolt. The high priest, Caiaphas, governed Jerusalem along with his counsel, the Sanhedrin, and the Temple guards. But they all answered to the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, who himself came to the festival to ensure that order was maintained.

Jesus rode into town on a donkey, thereby fulfilling a scriptural prophecy: “your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey.”[7] His followers hailed him as the Messiah, the successor of David, and spread palm leaves in his path. One can imagine the bemused expressions of the onlookers who had no idea who Jesus was, as well as the concern such a dramatic entry caused. It was a provocative act bound to come to the attention of the authorities.

Even more provocative, however, was the behavior of Jesus in the Temple. For some days he taught there, preaching the imminence of the kingdom of God on Earth and the coming exaltation of the poor and oppressed. At some point, he deliberately created a disturbance in the courtyard of the Gentiles, overturning the tables of the money changers, food merchants, and sellers of souvenirs, who were permitted to ply their wares there, and breaking open the cages of the birds to be sold for sacrifice. Given the constant presence of the Temple guards, the demonstration could not have been a large one, and its meaning has been hotly disputed. But it was clearly a symbolic and doctrinal protest of some sort against the Temple system, which had become a big business. Jesus seemed to be saying that God's house must be free of corruption and that the chosen people needed to reestablish their relationship directly with God and, through him, to one another. Jesus wanted to “cleanse” the Temple itself of expensive priestly rituals and sacrifices that were disconnected from the inner spirit and that separated the Jews from their God rather than drawing

them closer.

Jesus may also have been illustrating his prediction that the Temple itself would soon be destroyed: “Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”[8] That prediction is contained in the Gospel of Mark, which is generally dated before the destruction of the Temple by the Romans in 70. In Mark, Jesus is indicating that God himself will destroy the Temple when he establishes his kingdom on Earth and will replace it with a new, purified one.[9] Still, the prediction is striking enough that the later evangelists, all writing after 70, capitalize on it and even turn it into a foretelling by Jesus of his own crucifixion and resurrection.[10]

Jesus sufficiently offended and disconcerted the Temple elders that they plotted to arrest him. But they did not do so at the Temple itself for fear of inciting a riot among the increasing number of his followers. He was seized instead at night after the Passover meal (his “Last Supper” with the disciples) in the nearby garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of the Mount of Olives. One of his disciples, Judas, had agreed to betray him to the armed guards with a kiss. Why Judas did so—whether for thirty pieces of silver, for doctrinal reasons, out of jealousy, or perhaps just from fear of where all this talk of a new kingdom was leading—is unclear. But, according to the gospel writers, he lamented his choice and hanged himself after the crucifixion, and there is no reason to doubt either his betrayal or subsequent suicide.

Jesus was brought before the high priest and his council, the Sanhedrin. They quickly sent him on to Pilate, who, after a brief interrogation, had him crucified at Golgotha on Friday at noon, a crown of thorns on his head and the words “Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”—both in mockery and as a statement of his insurrectionist intent—inscribed above his head.

The motivation of Caiaphas and the Sanhedrin is not completely clear. Obviously, they feared any unrest and the harsh reprisals it would bring from Rome. They may also have feared the leveling message of Jesus, which seemed to challenge their comfortable hierarchy within the Temple system. They plainly did not consider him the Messiah promised in the Hebrew scriptures. But it is unlikely they found his religious message inherently blasphemous, as some of the gospel writers report. Jesus himself did not assert his own divinity and, even in most of the gospel accounts, was careful not to claim that he was more than God's chosen messenger.

Pilate's actions are easier to understand. He was by all accounts a brutal prefect whose immediate response to any form of sedition was to execute the offender. Crucifixion was reserved for enemies of the state, but that was a malleable category. Two other men were

crucified along with Jesus, but they appear to have been more ordinary bandits, although the Greek term for bandit (*lestes*) was also used for insurrectionists of various stripes. It is unlikely that Pilate considered Jesus to be a serious threat. As already noted, he took no steps to go after Jesus's followers, who quickly scattered and went into hiding after his arrest. But the teachings of Jesus himself were subversive enough to warrant his crucifixion before they spread further. Jesus might well have said, “Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's; render unto God that which is God's.”[11] But he was not advocating a separation of church and state, as is commonly supposed. In Jesus's view and in the view of the Jewish people more generally, Palestine belonged not to Rome but to God and the people of God.[12] A Jewish kingdom in Palestine for the favored children of God would have no place for Roman rule. Jesus taught that the present order would be destroyed and that God's kingdom would be established on Earth within the lifetime of many of his hearers. He self-consciously presented himself as a new King David, the harbinger, if not the military leader, of a new order. That alone was enough to get him killed.

Jesus was taken down from the cross on Friday afternoon, after the soldiers made sure he was dead by piercing his side with a spear. Joseph of Arimathea, a pious member of the Sanhedrin, sought and was granted permission by Pilate to bury the body. After having it wrapped in linen, he laid the body in a tomb and, as was traditional, had a large stone rolled over the entrance to protect the spot. That Sunday, some female followers of Jesus, led by Mary Magdalene, arrived to anoint the body with oil. They were concerned about who they could find to roll away the stone for them. But the stone covering the entrance had already been pushed aside, and the body of Jesus was gone.

## FROM JESUS TO CHRIST

There are two disconcerting but undeniable facts about the historical Jesus. First, he was crucified; second, the kingdom of God did not come. How were his followers to reconcile those two facts with their belief that Jesus was the Messiah who would redeem Israel? As the period after his death lengthened, it became increasingly difficult to view Jesus as anything more than another false prophet.

Yet the disciples were able to turn these two facts into virtues. In the process, they radically transformed Jesus and his apocalyptic

message. They explained that Jesus was not just a man, like King David; he was the Christ. “Christ” comes from *Christos*, which is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word for Messiah. It means “the anointed one,” “the one chosen by God.” Christ was God incarnate: wholly God and wholly man. He came to Earth to show men the path back to God. He died so that God would forgive us our trespasses and provide us a means of salvation. The day of judgment accordingly was deferred so that the message of Christ could be spread to the world and all peoples would have a chance at redemption.

These radical reinterpretations of Jesus and his message pivoted around the resurrection. Jesus the man could die. But Christ the God could not. Christ survived the crucifixion. And he revealed himself to his followers after his death and urged them to go forth and spread the *gospel* (literally, the “good news”) of the Lord. The movement that became Christianity was firmly grounded in the resurrection. The resurrection transformed the shocking failure of the crucifixion into a triumph over death itself. And it gradually, though incompletely, transformed the message of Jesus from promising a worldly kingdom for the chosen people of Israel to promising eternal life for all the faithful, including Gentiles. Christ's resurrection became the guarantor of man's potential redemption. As Paul forthrightly explains, “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”[13] Even more bluntly he notes, quoting Isaiah, “If the dead are not raised, ‘Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’”[14]

The disciples believed fervently, and no doubt sincerely, that the risen Christ had appeared to them. So did Paul, who considered himself one of the apostles by virtue of that vision. Yet the gospel accounts are vague and internally inconsistent about the events themselves and the exact bodily form of the risen Christ. His own disciples frequently fail to recognize Jesus until he deliberately reveals himself to them.

In Mark, the women arrive at the tomb to find a young man in a white robe who tells them that Jesus has risen and who urges them to tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. But the women do not see the risen Jesus, and they are too terrified to tell anyone. “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”[15] In Mark, the risen Jesus does not appear to anyone. There is a longer, alternative ending of this gospel, but it is almost certainly a later interpolation.

In Matthew, an angel descends from heaven and rolls back the stone. He, too, tells the women that Jesus has been raised and that they should tell the disciples that Jesus is going ahead of them to

Galilee. But “suddenly Jesus met them,” and they fell at his feet to worship him.[16] Then he appeared to the disciples. “When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted,”[17] which is an interesting observation if Jesus is standing there in front of them. Jesus sends them out to “make disciples of all nations.”[18] “And remember,” he adds, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”[19] Matthew also defensively reports that the Jewish priests, fearful of the new religion, bribed the soldiers guarding the tomb to claim that Jesus's body was stolen by the disciples during the night while they slept.[20] “And this story is still told among the Jews to this day,” he adds.[21]

In Luke, it is “two men in dazzling clothes” who meet the women at the tomb.[22] This time they do not see Jesus, but they do tell the disciples, who run to the empty tomb to examine it for themselves. Later on the same day, two of the faithful are walking on the road away from Jerusalem, when Jesus falls in with them. But they do not recognize him. Indeed, they express their disappointment at the crucifixion: “we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”[23] Only later, when Jesus sits with them at the table and blesses the bread and breaks it, do they recognize him. “Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”[24] In this account, Jesus is like an apparition. The two men rush to tell the eleven remaining disciples and their companions what they have seen. Suddenly, Jesus is among them. “They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.”[25] “While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”[26] To demonstrate that he is with them in the flesh, Jesus eats a piece of boiled fish—a curious detail, to be sure. He tells them to be “witnesses of these things.”[27] Then, “while he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.”[28]

In John, there are no men in shining clothes. There is just an empty tomb with the stone rolled back. The women run to the disciples, who rush back to inspect the tomb. After the puzzled and disturbed disciples depart, two angels appear to Mary Magdalene. Then Jesus himself comes to her, “but she did not know that it was Jesus.”[29] Jesus makes himself known only when he calls her by name. She goes to the disciples to announce, “I have seen the Lord.”[30] Later, Jesus appears to the disciples, who are meeting in a room “locked for fear of the Jews.”[31] Doubting Thomas is absent, so Jesus appears to them again a week later and shows Thomas the holes in his hands and feet and the spear wound in his side. Thomas professes his belief, but Jesus is not satisfied: “Have you believed because you have seen me?” he asks, and then adds, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”[32] Jesus appears to the disciples a third time on

the shore of the Sea of Galilee. “Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.”[33] Jesus directs them to put their nets in the sea, and they come up full of fish. “Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord.”[34] Before he leaves them, Jesus indicates that John—“the disciple whom Jesus loved”—will “remain until I come.”[35] That is to say, the kingdom of God will come within John's lifetime. But, of course, the kingdom of God does not come within John's lifetime. Indeed, John was no longer alive when the Gospel according to John was written. Though the gospel itself claims otherwise—“This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true”[36]—that, too, is a later interpolation, as the change of pronouns clearly indicates.

The Acts of the Apostles adds little to these varied accounts, though it indicates that Jesus remained with the disciples for forty days after his resurrection and “presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs.”[37] Again, this is an odd expression and seems overly defensive. If Jesus presented himself to the disciples in human form, what other “convincing proofs” did they require? Acts does not specify. Moreover, Jesus appeared only to a select few. As Peter explains when he sends forth the disciples to proselytize, “God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”[38] Their job, then, is to testify to others who were not vouchsafed that vision.

According to Acts, after forty days, Jesus ascended into heaven, where he sits at the right hand of God, awaiting the day of judgment. But he does reappear to the Christian-hating Saul, though not in human form, when Saul is on the road to Damascus, bent on persecuting the new sect. According to Acts, as confirmed in various of Paul's letters, Jesus appears to Saul as a flash grenade from heaven (“suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him”), which leaves him blinded for several days.[39] “Saul, Saul,” Jesus says to him, “why do you persecute me?” Jesus instructs Saul: “Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.”[40] Saul becomes a convert—indeed, he considers himself on a par with the original apostles in virtue of this direct encounter with the risen Christ—and changes his name to Paul. More than anyone else, Paul is responsible both for shaping and spreading the new faith.

During his lifetime, Jesus the man had little impact outside his immediate circle. As E. P. Sanders rightly notes, “When he was executed, Jesus was no more important to the outside world than the two brigands or insurgents executed with him—whose names we do not know.”[41] The Acts of the Apostles and the various letters and

epistles of Paul describe the process by which news of the risen Christ gradually spread around the Mediterranean. Despite the efforts of Peter and Jesus's brother, James, limited progress was made among the Jews of Jerusalem. Since the kingdom of God—and with it the redemption of Israel—did not come, Jewish interest in the self-proclaimed Messiah waned. It was replaced by hardening hostility to the new Christians. Stephen—the first Christian martyr—was dragged from the Temple and stoned to death by angry Jews after he denounced the members of the Sanhedrin as "uncircumcised in heart and ears" (i.e., unfaithful to the spirit of the Jewish faith) and the "betrayers and murderers" of Christ.[42] James the Just, brother of Jesus, was unlawfully executed on the orders of the high priest during a brief vacuum in Roman power. Later, Paul himself was arrested at the Temple and, after an extended imprisonment, was sent to Rome, where, along with Peter, he was eventually executed on the orders of Nero.

The apostles had better luck among the Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora. Christian communities developed out of Greek-speaking synagogues in cities in Asia Minor, the Middle East, Greece, North Africa, and, eventually, Italy. Paul and other believers visited, lived in, and worked with these Greek-speaking communities, carefully cultivating a core group of believers and then nurturing the growth of the local church. Services were often held in private homes, and Paul wrote frequent letters and epistles designed to encourage the small groups of adherents and to correct any errors of doctrine into which they strayed.

But Paul quickly realized that it was among Gentiles that the new religion would have its greatest and most lasting success. Jesus himself had made clear that his teaching was directed "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."[43] Jesus was a Jewish prophet, preaching to God's chosen people. In one of the most remarkable and disturbing passages in the gospels, Jesus is asked to cast out a demon from the daughter of a Gentile. He demurs at first, saying, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."[44] That is to say, the Jews are the children of God; the Gentiles are as dogs in comparison.[45] Jesus came for the salvation of the former, not the latter. The fact that this story made it into the gospels—despite the increased focus in the New Testament on converting the Gentiles—is a strong indicator of its historical accuracy. It survived perhaps because Jesus does, in the end, cure the girl out of regard for the faith of her mother. In the gospel accounts, moreover, he becomes more inclusive in his message as he grows increasingly frustrated with the resistance of the Jews. He curses the fig tree that bears no fruit.[46] And, after prophesying his own death at the behest of the Jewish leaders, he tells the parable of

the vineyard, in which the tenants kill the son who comes to collect the owner's share of the produce. Jesus asks how the owner will respond. “He will come and destroy the tenants and give the vineyard to others.”[47] That is to say, God will destroy the Jews who rejected and killed his son and give salvation to the Gentiles.

Paul made it his special mission to bring the message of Christ to a Gentile audience. “I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised,” he explains, “just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised.”[48] He bluntly tells his fellow Jews, “It was necessary that the word of God should be spoken first to you. Since you reject it and judge yourselves to be unworthy of eternal life, we are now turning to the Gentiles.”[49] “They will listen,” he adds.[50] Christianity in Paul's hands was no longer a movement *within* Judaism. As Matthew, writing after Paul, explains, “Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”[51]

Paul accordingly changed the focus of Christianity by absolving new adherents from compliance with traditional Jewish laws. Circumcision, sacrifice, dietary restrictions—all became not just irrelevant but even an impediment to salvation through faith in Christ alone. For “if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing.”[52] “In Christ Jesus,” he explains, “neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.”[53] The various regulations and requirements of Jewish law “are only a shadow;” “the substance belongs to Christ.”[54] “Or is God the God of Jews only?” he asks. “Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one; and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised through that same faith.”[55]

Paul, then, did not just change Jesus, the Jewish prophet, into the Son of God for all peoples; he changed God himself. Paul sought to Hellenize God the Father, to divorce the God of the Old Testament from his partisan, Semitic roots in an appeal to a broader audience. In the Letter to the Hebrews, attributed to Paul, he writes, “Let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ.”[56] The perfection he sought was to universalize the Christian religion in order to render it compelling to those schooled in the pagan and philosophical traditions of ancient Greece.

In a highly symbolic encounter described in Acts, Paul went to Athens, the shrine of ancient philosophy. There, “Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him.”[57] He stood on the Areopagus, a hill near the Acropolis with mythic significance for the Greeks, and made

his appeal to the philosophers. As the German classicist Werner Jaeger notes, the ancient Greek system of multiple, pagan gods adapted by the Romans had collapsed, creating a vacuum.[58] This pagan polytheism—full of empty rituals and sacrifices—was not worthy of philosophical assent. In its place, Paul offered them a previously "unknown god,"[59] one consistent with the abstract teachings of the philosophers.

> The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things.[60]

The God worshipped by Jesus was still the God of the Hebrew scriptures. The God of Christianity became, in Paul's hand, a far more benevolent—if abstract—creation whose relations with man were mediated by Christ. This was a God the philosophers could embrace as the ground and explanation of all things. Yet it was still, Paul insisted, a God worthy of worship and obedience. As Werner Jaeger has noted, the teachings of Christ became, in Paul's hands, a continuation of Greek *paideia* (education), both as a way to a broader and sounder intellectual framework, like that sought by Plato and Aristotle, and as a method for transforming one's life, like that sought by the Epicureans and the Stoics. What Christ offered them most of all, Paul contended, was wisdom, an appreciation of their metaphysical and moral place in the universe.[61] "Jews demand signs," he noted, but "Greeks desire wisdom."[62] Ever since Paul, Christian theologians have been trying to close this gap between the "unknown god" of philosophy and the Old Testament God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Paul's genius was to recognize just how susceptible the Hellenized Greeks and their Roman counterparts were to the wisdom offered by Christianity. There were less than six hundred thousand Christians in the entire Roman Empire by the end of the first century.[63] There were about five times as many by the end of the third century. That number increased exponentially with the opportunistic conversion of the emperor Constantine in 312 and the declaration by the emperor Theodosius in 380 that Christianity was the official religion of the empire.

The church had become an institution. Like any institution, it had to regularize its practices. Christianity had hitherto been community-based, and these communities varied widely in their beliefs and traditions. It is more accurate to say that there had been a rise in Christianities rather than in a monolithic Christianity. Dozens of accounts of Jesus's life and teachings were in existence during the first

few centuries of the Common Era. The choice among them was a doctrinal one, and there was no centralized authority to make that choice. The precise nature of Jesus proved a particularly controversial point. Some, like the Arians, contended that he was not fully God but a lesser divinity. Others, like the Gnostics, whose scrolls were discovered in a desert cave in Upper Egypt near the town of Nag Hammadi in 1945, argued that he was wholly God and only appeared on Earth in the guise of a man, a phantom rather than flesh and blood.

This controversy was resolved in 325 at a conference convened by Constantine in Nicaea in what is now western Turkey. The result was the Nicene Creed, which professed that Christ was wholly God ("one in substance with the Father") and wholly man (a God "incarnate" who "suffered, died, and was buried"). In keeping with the Nicene Creed, the New Testament canon was established in 367 by Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria. Its twenty-seven books included four gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, twenty-one letters and epistles, and the extravagant, fantastical Apocalypse, or Book of Revelation. It is not a uniform set of documents by any means, and it does not in all respects support the Nicene Creed. But it has served as the core of Christian beliefs since that time.

## THE GOSPELS

The canonical gospels are attributed to four authors: Matthew and John were among the twelve original disciples; Luke was a companion of Paul; and Mark acted as secretary to Peter. But these attributions ("the Gospel according to…") were added long after the gospels themselves were written. Pseudepigraphical writings (i.e., books attributed to someone other than the actual author) were common at that time. Matthew and John, both of whom were likely illiterate and not conversant in Greek, almost certainly did not write the gospels that bear their names. Scholarly consensus is that Mark and Luke did not either (although scholars do agree that the author of the Gospel of Luke was also the author of the Acts of the Apostles). There is also a mild scholarly consensus that "Mark" and possibly "Luke"—that is, the actual authors of the gospels attributed to Mark and Luke—were not even Jews.[64]

The gospels were written between 65 and 100, with the first one appearing as much as thirty-five years after the death of Jesus. Before that, stories about the life and teachings of Jesus depended largely on

oral tradition. For decades, these stories were retold within different religious communities and shaped by the needs and concerns of those communities. They were eventually written down as works of theology and faith more than as biographies of the historical figure of Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark was the earliest, the shortest, and the most artless of the four. It was probably written between 65 and 70, before or during the Jewish revolt that began in 66. It was undoubtedly based on earlier documents, which we do not possess, as well as on oral traditions. The reason we believe it came first (despite the primacy of Matthew in the New Testament) is that both Matthew and Luke incorporate much of it, often word for word, in their own gospels, as well as additional material that apparently was not available to Mark. For example, aside from some parables, Mark does not describe in any detail the teachings of Jesus. These teachings, including the famous Sermon on the Mount, appear to derive from another lost document (known to scholars as "Q") that was added by both Matthew and Luke, though at different points, to Mark's basic narrative. In addition, Matthew and Luke each appear to have had access to separate documents (known as "M" and "L") not available to the other.[65] The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke are known as the "Synoptic Gospels," from the Greek *Syn-opses*, meaning "seen together." The three gospels can be set side by side in columns comparing the passages common to each. The Gospels of Matthew and Luke were probably written independently of one another between 80 and 85. The Gospel of John, written around the end of the first century, is the outlier, both chronologically and substantively.

We will explore the powerful moral teachings of Jesus in the next section. Before doing so, however, it is worth pointing out some of the ways in which the gospel accounts evolved from the simplicity of Mark, which starts with the baptism of Jesus by John. Matthew and Luke together provide the standard birth account now so well known to us: the virgin birth (with angels sent to reassure both Mary and Joseph); the census that forces the young couple from their home in Nazareth; the manger in Bethlehem; the awed shepherds; the visit of the magi; the flight into Egypt; and the murder of the innocents by Herod. It is a beautiful and compelling narrative, which has shaped our consciousness, and our Christmas carols, ever since. Yet, however well envisioned from a theological or literary perspective, it is complete nonsense as history.

Matthew and Luke added these details not because they had any basis in fact but because they showed that the life of Jesus fulfilled various passages in the Hebrew scriptures, which became the Christian Old Testament. Matthew includes a questionable genealogy

that traces Jesus directly to King David. But it does so through Joseph, who Matthew then tells us was not in fact Jesus's biological father. Both Matthew and Luke contrive to have Jesus born in Bethlehem (with a historically inaccurate and frankly incoherent census story) because the Old Testament states: "But you, O Bethlehem…from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel."[66] The story that Herod ordered all babies in and around Bethlehem less than two years old to be murdered (something Josephus surely would have recorded if it were true) became the reason for Joseph and Mary, warned by an angel, to flee to Egypt. As Matthew explains, "This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'"[67] This is not to say that Matthew and Luke deliberately falsified history. But the Hebrew scriptures made certain prophecies about the Messiah; Jesus, in their view, was the Messiah; therefore, Jesus must have fulfilled those prophecies. Luke in particular was a skilled writer, and his elaborate account of the annunciation—in which the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, and she replies, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."[68]—is a moving minimasterpiece. We could not want it otherwise, even if we cannot accept it as history.

What we could wish were otherwise, however, is the increasing anti-Semitism in the gospels. The Jewish revolt in 66 was fueled by the Zealots. These militant Jews believed that God would lead them to prevail against their foreign oppressors and establish a kingdom on Earth. They expelled the Romans from their Holy Land, but their victory was short-lived. After some delays, while dueling emperors fought one another, the rebellion was crushed by Rome in 70. Jerusalem and its magnificent Temple were destroyed and the residents were slaughtered. The last Jewish redoubt at Masada was captured in 73, just after the Jews who had sought refuge there engaged in a mass suicide.

At least three of the gospels were composed after these horrendous events. In Matthew, in particular, a concerted effort is made (consistent with fidelity to Mark) to downplay any respects in which Jesus was a threat to or an enemy of Rome. These gospels softened his revolutionary message and made him a purely spiritual leader. Jesus the Jewish nationalist became Christ, the savior of all peoples. The Jews themselves, in their hostility to the message of Jesus, become the prime movers in his execution. Pontius Pilate, despite being notorious and ultimately recalled by Rome for the frequency with which he ordered executions, is absolved of the murder. That blame is laid squarely at the feet of the Jews. Pilate washes his hands and declares, "'I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves.' Then the people as a whole answered, 'His blood

be on us and on our children!'"[69] Those fateful words have been used to justify centuries of anti-Semitism, often by people willfully ignorant of the fact that Jesus was himself a Jew. In Luke, the destruction of Jerusalem is described as a direct punishment for the failure of the Jews to "recognize the time of your visitation from God."[70] In John, "the Jews" are constantly referenced as the enemies of Christ.

Another shift noticeable in the gospels is that Jesus becomes increasingly divine and removed from the humanity portrayed in accounts written earlier. In the passion narrative of Mark and Matthew, Jesus spends anguished hours in the garden of Gethsemane as he anticipates his coming ordeal. He even calls to God using the intimate Aramaic word for Father, *Abba*: "Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want."[71] As he dies on the cross, he cries out again, "'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"[72] In Luke, Jesus would have the cup pass from him as well, but an angel comes from heaven to give him strength. And when he dies on the cross, he does not accuse God of abandoning him. He merely says, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."[73] We miss the vulnerability and human despair of the earlier accounts.

The apotheosis of Jesus is complete in the Gospel of John. He knows neither anguish in the garden nor despair on the cross. He knows only "that his hour ha[s] come to depart from this world and go to the Father."[74] In John, Jesus and God are indistinguishable. "The Father and I are one," Jesus says.[75] John's gospel is a biography of God himself come to Earth: "Before Abraham was, I am," Jesus announces.[76]

The Gospel according to John appears to have been written independently and without knowledge of the Synoptic Gospels, though it shares some of the same traditions. The prologue celebrates the unknown god of the Hellenic philosophers:

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.[77]

With Jesus, "the Word became flesh and lived among us."[78] Jesus is the true light to lead men out of darkness and into faith: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."[79] Jesus is himself "the resurrection and the life."[80]

Like Mark, John starts with the adult life of Jesus. There is no

virgin birth story, no childhood development. “I am,” says Jesus, not “I became.” There is also no baptism (merely testimony by John as to the divine status of Jesus) and no temptation in the wilderness. Many of the traditional gospel stories (the parables, the Last Supper, Gethsemane) find no place in John. Jesus does perform miracles (turning water into wine and raising Lazarus from the dead) as signs designed to compel belief in his divinity; still, “they did not believe in him.”[81] They denied that Jesus is the Christ. Yet, in the Gospel of John, one at times senses a corresponding denial that Christ was, in fact, Jesus. John leans heavily in the direction of the Gnostic heresy, according to which the physical world is fundamentally evil and Christ merely appeared to be a man. In John, Christ came from the spiritual world to bring a message of salvation. But “it is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless.”[82] Jesus is more God and less man than in any of the Synoptic Gospels.

## THE MORAL TEACHINGS OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

All three Synoptic Gospels report that, at the moment Jesus expired on the cross, the curtain in the Temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The act—presumably performed by God himself—was highly symbolic. No more would worshipers be separated from God by priestly rituals and sacrifices. Jesus had become their direct intermediary. Yet the tearing of the curtain worked both ways. For the people now stood naked before God. They could not hide behind the priestly rituals and sacrifices either. Jesus placed morality, rather than ritual, at the center of religious observance. God would know them by their deeds and by their hearts. Attending services and making donations to the church may be good, but our moral dealings with others take precedence. “So when you are offering your gift at the altar,” Jesus explains, “if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.”[83]

For Jesus, there are only two commandments: to love God and to love one's neighbor as one's self. Love of God and love of neighbor are ultimately the same, however, for we love in others the reflection of God. That is also true in reverse. We love in God our abstraction from the divine spark that we see in others. When we serve others, we serve God, and we serve God by serving others. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you

did it to me."[84] Throughout the gospels, Jesus indicates that those who do good deeds on Earth thereby store up treasure in heaven. They do not need an earthly reward because "your Father who sees in secret will reward you."[85] Indeed, any earthly reward, such as power or wealth, is anathema to his message. Thus, Jesus constantly stresses "how hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God."[86] But Jesus does not always reduce morality to this sort of bargain between a temporal, earthly sacrifice and an eternal heavenly reward (or its opposite, eternal damnation). He stresses the importance in its own right of love between people, not as a sacrifice, but as our highest fulfillment as human beings. It is therefore well worth considering and evaluating the moral teachings of Jesus apart from their religious overlay.

His emphasis on love is Jesus's most powerful message, reflected repeatedly in the gospel stories, parables, and direct teachings. Take the story of the prodigal son as told in Luke. A man has two sons, between whom he divides his property. The younger boy travels to a distant country where he squanders his property in dissolute living. He ends up after some years as a hired hand, feeding pigs. Miserable and starving, he decides to return home, asking not to be taken in as a son, for he is no longer worthy of that name, but only as a hired hand. The father, seeing him approach from afar, runs to embrace him, has him clothed in a new robe and sandals, and kills the fatted calf to celebrate his return. The elder brother, who had always been obedient and hardworking, refuses to join the celebration and reproaches his father for preferring the dissolute son over the faithful one. The father's answer is heartfelt:

> Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life; he was lost and has been found.[87]

The biblical message of the story is that heaven rejoices over a sinner who repents, over a lost sheep who returns to the fold. But the human message is much stronger. Love is not measured and portioned like property. The father loves his lost son regardless of his failings and welcomes his return with open arms and a full heart. No parent can read the story without tears and joy.

The same is true of the brief vignette of a father pleading for Jesus to cast a demon from his son, who is plagued with seizures and convulsions. Jesus tells him that all things can be done for one who believes. "Immediately the father of the child cried out, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'"[88] Jesus cures the boy, but here, again, it is not belief

that matters but love. It is love that cries out, “I believe; help my unbelief!”

The story of the Good Samaritan extends love beyond family ties to the stranger. When Jesus is preaching love of one's neighbor, he is challenged by a quibbling lawyer: “And who is my neighbor?”[89] Jesus then tells the parable of a man traveling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho who is set upon by robbers, beaten, and left half-dead. A priest and a Levite (a member of the Jewish tribe of Levi) both cross to the other side of the road and pass him by. But a Samaritan—a member of a neighboring tribe despised by the Jews—is moved with pity and stops to help the man. The Samaritan cleans and bandages his wounds, places the man on the Samaritan's own animal, and brings him to an inn where the Samaritan ministers to him. When the Samaritan leaves, he gives money to the innkeeper to take care of the man and promises to return to repay any additional costs. “Which of these three,” Jesus asks, “was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”[90] The question is superfluous, but the injunction “Go and do likewise”[91] is a call to every person to treat others with compassion and mercy born of love. It is a terrible and difficult injunction, like that given to the would-be follower of Jesus who is told, first, to sell all he owns and give the money to the poor. “When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.”[92]

Compared to these powerful stories, the famous beatitudes (“Blessed are the…”) in the Sermon on the Mount, reported by Matthew and Luke, are something of a disappointment. Especially in Luke's hand, the beatitudes merely announce that the tables will be turned when the kingdom of heaven is realized: the lowly will be raised, and the exalted will be cast down. If you are poor, you will inherit the earth; if you are hungry, you will be filled; if you weep now, you will laugh. But “woe to you who are rich.”[93] Woe to you who are full now or who laugh now.

There is nothing of love here, nothing of moral obligations. The speech is simply divisive. In Matthew's version at least, Jesus praises those who are merciful, those who are peacemakers, those who are pure in heart. But in Matthew, as in Luke, the point is that “your reward is great in heaven.”[94] Their focus is on the poor and oppressed, but social justice is deferred to the kingdom of heaven, which both Matthew and Luke consider imminent.[95] Both gospel writers accordingly preach passivity in the face of injustice.

> Do not resist an evil-doer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also

the second mile.[96]

In passages such as these, religion becomes a powerful force for an unjust status quo, the "opium of the people," as Marx would call it.[97] It trades otherworldly compensation for an earthly existence rendered miserable by poverty and injustice.

Only when Jesus returns to the subject of love does he advocate a more positive and constructive moral message. That message of love is a difficult one: "the gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it."[98] We must love our neighbors (including total strangers) as we love ourselves. "Do to others as you would have them do to you," Jesus says in Luke.[99] The same injunction is in Matthew: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you."[100] Jesus would even have us return hatred with love. He would have us love our enemies and do good to those who hate us.

> If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same.[101]

In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates refutes the traditional ancient view that the essence of justice is to benefit one's friends and harm one's enemies. Socrates argues that it is never just to harm another.[102] Yet not even Socrates argues that we should love our enemies and do good to those who hate us. Indeed, we are justified in asking whether anyone could actually live like that, whether it would it even be advisable as an aspirational ideal. Perhaps that is what saints are for, to show us how far one can travel on this difficult road of love.

Saint Paul struggles with such questions in his letters to the new Christian communities he and his followers have founded. These letters, which were written between 49 and his death in 65, are the oldest New Testament documents. In them, Paul wants to give advice that is practical and realistic, and yet is consistent with the teachings of Christ. Usually Paul's letters are hortatory—epistolary pep talks—and didactic, as he corrects one or more perceived doctrinal errors into which the communities have fallen. But occasionally he rises above such concerns and conveys more beautifully than in any gospel the importance of love to the Christian faith. In the Letter to the Romans, written shortly before his beheading on orders of Nero, he writes:

> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.[103]

And in his Letter to the Galatians, he notes that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."[104]

Paul captures the moral essence of Christianity. He preaches a doctrine of love that is in keeping with the parables and stories told by Jesus, an ideal of love that is deeply attractive and not, at first glance, so very far out of reach. It is a love that shuns personal advantage—lust for wealth, power, or sex—in favor of personal relationships that extend even to the stranger or, still harder, to the estranged. We must become "fools for the sake of Christ,"[105] Paul stresses in chapter 4 of 1 Corinthians, a point Fyodor Dostoevsky would illustrate so beautifully in his novel *The Idiot*.[106] We must be neglectful of worldly concerns in order to cultivate the divine within ourselves and others.

Paul gives us the most beautiful passage on love in the entire New Testament, a passage not just for weddings but for everyday life:

> If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.
>
> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
>
> Love never ends.[107]

Paul had faith, and he had hope. He even expected the kingdom of God to come in his lifetime. As his house arrest in Rome dragged on and his execution appeared increasingly likely, he never despaired.

Paul went to his death on the orders of Nero around the year 65. "I have fought the good fight," he wrote in anticipation, "I have finished the race."[108] As a Roman citizen, he was accorded the courtesy of being beheaded rather than crucified. But Paul bequeathed his testimony to the ensuing generations: "faith, hope, and love abide,

these three; and the greatest of these is love."[109] That message of love, faith, and hope would, at least as an aspiration, dominate the Western world for the next 1,300 years. Yet the pagan classics of Greece and Rome were never wholly lost and forgotten during this time. As we shall see in the next two chapters, pagan learning infused the efforts of Christians, such as Augustine and Boethius, to make sense of their new religion. The ancient world may have gone underground, but the so-called Dark Ages had many moments of light as well as shadow.

# Chapter 2

# AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

## Journey of a Restless Heart

Augustine of Hippo was a famous saint and an even more famous sinner. In the *Confessions*, he chronicles his pride, his ambition, his vanity, his dishonesty, and, most strikingly of all, his insuppressible lust. Yet anyone thumbing through the book to find the good bits will be sorely disappointed. The external events Augustine recounts pale into insignificance before the battles taking place in his own soul. The *Confessions* is a moral, intellectual, and spiritual biography of great psychological depth—modern in tone yet very much enmeshed in the concerns of its day. It can fairly be considered to have launched medieval thought, as well as the Renaissance musings of Montaigne and Pascal and the Enlightenment outpourings of Rousseau and Goethe; Augustine must even bear some responsibility for the modern memoir in all its naked self-absorption.

Unlike any of those later books, however, Augustine is not addressing his reader directly. He is speaking to God. As Peter Brown, Augustine's most important biographer, puts it, "Augustine's back is turned to us throughout the *Confessions*."[1] He is worshiping at the altar, and we are simply allowed to overhear his unique combination of prayer, praise, and repentance. That is what *Confessiones* means in its original Latin: not just a confession of sins but also a profession of faith, a hymn of praise to the power and glory of God, and a desperate plea for grace.

The undertaking itself is audacious. Maria Boulding, a translator and scholar of Augustine, notes, "It is something remarkable, even daring, for a man to write a book addressed to God which is

principally about himself."[2] Yet, however personally intimate it may seem, the book is saved by the universality of Augustine's predicament. Augustine is not Everyman. He is brilliant, ambitious, and uniquely gifted as a writer and thinker. But "he saw his life, at its deepest level, as a re-enactment of the cosmic drama traceable in the sacred writings."[3] Augustine interweaves his narrative with frequent biblical quotations to show how the scriptures are realized in his halting movements from sin to repentance to redemption through grace.

The *Confessions* is intended to be, and is, a radically new sort of book. It is a replacement for the rhetoric, literature, and philosophy of the classical world and yet is dependent upon, and an extension of, each. Augustine is driven by his own *inquietum*, a restless longing that finds only the most ephemeral fulfillment in the physical and secular world. Augustine examined all conventional values and found them wanting: learning, power, sex—none of these will suffice. But what can replace them? To what home shall the prodigal son return? Where will his longing be stilled and his heart find rest?

The *Confessions* is, like the *Odyssey*, an epic of return and yet is completely different in its goal. It reveals an innate human longing to move from the physical to the spiritual, from the temporal to the eternal, from worldly striving to heavenly peace, from alienation to a sense of cosmic belonging. It tells of a man turning gradually but willfully away from God toward the external world and its false and ultimately unsatisfying rewards, and then trying to retrace his steps to the ultimate source of his being. Augustine is driven through life by two things: a longing for love and a longing for truth. But he looks for them in all the wrong places until he finds both in God. One need not share Augustine's faith in the journey's end to experience his concerns and missteps as both moving and resonant.

Augustine began the *Confessions* in 397, eleven years after his dramatic conversion recounted in book 9. He was still in his early forties but was already the Bishop of Hippo and an effective interpreter of, and fierce advocate for, Christian doctrines. He wrote the *Confessions* in part in response to critics who took offense at his precipitous elevation and who were suspicious of his intellectual dexterity and long flirtation with Manichaeism, Neoplatonism, and other sects.

But, mostly, Augustine wrote to show how the sharp break in his own life corresponded to a historic shift from a classical to a Christian mode of thought. As Werner Jaeger, the definitive scholar on the evolving Greek conception of education, explains, "This is the great difference of Christianity from all mere human philosophy, that it represents the coming of the Logos [word of God] to man not only as

a human effort but as proceeding from a divine initiative."[4] Augustine internalizes this transition in the story of his own life and conversion. He seeks to reconcile independent philosophical inquiry into truth with the divine revelations of the Bible. He tries to bring a flawed human logos (reasoned discourse) as close as possible to the divine logos, which is the word of God. They both, he believes, point in the same direction, but only the intercession and example of Christ can complete the journey and allow us to find peace and fulfillment in God. Classical thought did not disappear to be rediscovered in the Renaissance; it was deeply embedded in Christianity the entire time. Augustine, more than anyone, put it there, even while circumscribing its role and stressing its limitations.

## CHILDHOOD, BOYHOOD, YOUTH

Augustine was born in Thagaste in North Africa on November 13, 354. Thagaste was an inland hill town in what is now eastern Algeria, more than one hundred miles from the coast. Yet North Africa at that time was integrated by Rome with the rest of the Mediterranean, and the African provinces were wealthy from grain shipments. Latin was the common language. Although Punic was still heard in and around Carthage, and there were Greek speakers at all the seaports, Latin was the language of education, administration, and the army. And it would become the language of the church, despite the fact that the Old and New Testaments were written in Hebrew and Greek, respectively.

Augustine's father, Patrick, was a small landowner and minor official of modest means. His mother, Monica, was Berber in origin and a devout Catholic. She was twenty-three when her son was born; it would prove the single most important relationship for both the overinvolved mother and the devoted but often rebellious son, culminating in a mystical vision shared by mother and son shortly before the former's death. Augustine did not have a close relationship with his father. He says little about him other than that he was unfaithful to his wife and "had a hot temper,"[5] but was otherwise kind and eager to ensure a good education for his obviously bright son. Augustine had a younger brother, Navigius, and at least one sister, Perpetua, who became a nun. But we hear little of them either.

The local education was grossly inadequate. Augustine was subjected to frequent and severe canings, leaving him with a distaste for his master and for the Greek language, which he stubbornly refused to learn—a failure he lamented as an adult. Augustine

eventually was sent for three years to study in nearby Madaura, but his father could not afford to keep him there. He returned to Thagaste and idleness for more than a year before a neighbor, Romanianus, impressed with his talent, paid for him to study in Carthage. Patrick died shortly after he left, and Romanianus became the first of many mentors and sponsors upon whom Augustine relied.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine reflects on these years mainly as a period in which sin took root in his soul. “I was a great sinner for so small a boy,” he claims.[6] In fact, his “sins” were both minor and pedestrian, part of the common fare of human life. Yet that is precisely Augustine's point. Our innate human existence is rife with willfulness, violence, and manipulation. This is evident from observing even infants, who are jealous of any divided attention from mother or nurse, and who thrash and cry when their desires are not satisfied. “If babies are innocent,” Augustine writes, “it is not for lack of will to do harm, but for lack of strength.”[7] Even the learning of language is driven by our desire to express our needs and wants more clearly. This will become a critical point for the mature Augustine, a master of expression, who finds human language inherently inadequate to the deeper truths of religion.

Yet Augustine never doubted that there were such deeper truths. He drank in religious belief with his mother's milk. Their common faith in God and in Christ was, for Monica and her young son, a passive-aggressive response to the unbelieving father. Monica obeyed Patrick because virtue required it but thereby made clear that she was his superior in virtue. In this, the young Augustine made alliance with his mother. He also prayed to God for help as to some great person who would listen and intercede on his behalf, as his own father would not: “though I was small, my devotion was great when I begged you not to let me be beaten at school.”[8] Prayer became an extension of the language of everyday life, another means of expressing desires and seeking favor. When Augustine, at the age of seven, was gravely ill and lay close to death, he pleaded for baptism as a way of preparing his soul. But he recovered, and baptism “was postponed, in the surmise that, if I continued to live, I should defile myself again with sin and, after baptism, the guilt of pollution would be greater and more dangerous.”[9]

This was truly a paradox. Since baptism wiped away sin, it was often deferred until well into adulthood, when many sins would have accumulated. After baptism, one's life had to be dedicated to God, and sin was harder to forgive. So Monica let her son run free and pursue a course of worldly ambition—indeed, she encouraged that course—and yet always hoped that eventually he would find salvation in the

church: “my mother well knew how many great tides of temptation threatened me before I grew up, and she chose to let them beat upon the as yet unmoulded clay rather than upon the finished image which had received the stamp of baptism.”[10]

So Augustine continued in his sinful course. He rebelled at school and refused to learn things he could have put to good use later. Games and spectacles were more fun—an eternal schoolboy's lament. He told many lies to disguise his idleness, his love of sports and plays. He stole from the larder to trade for toys. And he cheated in games to come off better, though he deeply resented it when others cheated him.

There was nothing innocent about this childhood, he claims. To the contrary, it established a pattern for maturity and entrenched habits that were hard to break. “For commanders and kings may take the place of tutors and schoolmasters, nut and balls and pet birds may give way to money and estates and servants, but these same passions remain with us while one stage of life follows upon another.”[11] He was punished for playing games “by men who played games themselves.”[12] Yet grown-up games are known as “business” and therefore are acceptable. They reflect “man's insatiable desire for the poverty he calls wealth and the infamy he knows as fame.”[13] In pursuing this “parody of life,”[14] we break our troth with God, yet other men applaud us, and we are ashamed to do otherwise.[15] Already, as a child, Augustine was in his own small way following that fateful course.

He notes, however, that there were innate positives in his childhood as well. Despite his aversion to enforced studies, he developed a love of truth and an increasing command of language. Sounding like a protoproponent of the Montessori method, he notes, “We learn better in a free spirit of curiosity than under fear and compulsion.”[16] He also grew physically strong and began a lifelong love of friendship that would turn gradually from the self-interested Roman conception of *amicitia* (friendship based on mutual services) into a commitment to monastic life (a small community of like-minded believers) in his later years.

Yet Augustine compares himself to the prodigal son, who wasted his patrimony in dissipation and sin. These sins became worse when, at the age of sixteen, Augustine had to return from Madaura to Thagaste and enforced idleness because Patrick could no longer afford his education. He fell in with a crowd of boys who roamed the streets well after dark and for whom mischief was an end in itself. One night they went to a nearby vineyard, shook the fruit from a tree, and made off with an enormous quantity of pears. From any perspective, this was hardly a major crime, but Augustine dissects his motivation with

great care and psychological insight. It was, after all, a parallel of the original sin of Adam and Eve, and—as it did for them—it provided Augustine with his own knowledge of good and evil. The boys did not steal the pears because they were hungry or because the pears were tasty. They mostly threw them to the pigs, and Augustine notes that he had better at home freely available to him. The boys stole simply for the joy of doing something that was forbidden. They wallowed, like the pigs, in their own sin. Augustine recognizes that he would not have done it on his own. It was only as part of a group—the first of many false communities he would join—that the temptation became compelling, just as Adam and Eve forged a companionship in sin: "all because we are ashamed to hold back when others say 'Come on! Let's do it!'"[17] Augustine thus highlights the irrationality of sin and the dangers of conformity and corruption by others.

Yet Augustine cannot deny that there was something inherently and compulsively attractive, all on its own, about the sins of the flesh. "Bodily desire, like a morass, and adolescent sex welling up within me exuded mists which clouded over and obscured my heart," he writes, "so that I could not distinguish the clear light of true love from the murk of lust."[18] Here, too, though, he was ashamed to be less dissolute than his friends. Thus, he took pleasure not only in vice itself but in the applause it won, and even pretended to be more vicious than he was. "I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity for weakness."[19]

His father was pleased with the signs of his son's growing virility. Monica warned her son against fornication or at least urged him to stop short of seducing another man's wife. But her ambition for her son seems to have trumped even her strict Christianity. Neither parent wanted him to marry as yet, since that might interfere with his career plans. His family's "only concern," he claims, "was that I should learn how to make a good speech and how to persuade others by my words."[20] So they allowed him to sow his wild oats, and though he found physical release he "was caught up in the coils of trouble, for [he] was lashed with the cruel, fiery rods of jealousy and suspicion, fear, anger, and quarrels."[21]

Shortly before his eighteenth birthday, in 372, Augustine took a mistress, or concubine, or common-law wife: any and all of those terms might apply. She was from a class lower than his own, and marriage appears never to have been considered. It was, he says, "a bargain struck for lust,"[22] a not uncommon practice for young men of better families while they waited for an advantageous match. Augustine, however, was more faithful than most. He never mentions the woman's name, but he lived monogamously with her for more than fourteen years and appears genuinely to have loved her, though

—as we shall see—only to the point where she did not interfere with his advancement. They even had a son together in 373, named Adeodatus (meaning “God given”), who was unplanned but nonetheless cherished.

With his sexual life stabilized and relatively secure, Augustine found that, in the end, his greatest temptations were now intellectual, and they led him farther astray from his God.

## LIMITATIONS OF PAGAN WISDOM

Thanks to Romanianus, Augustine was able to spend three years, from the ages of seventeen to twenty, furthering his education at Carthage. He studied Latin literature, law, and rhetoric. “It was my ambition to be a good speaker,” he notes, “for the unhallowed and inane purpose of gratifying human vanity.”[23] He would pass the following eleven years as a professor of rhetoric and literature, first at home in Thagaste, then back in Carthage, then in Rome, and, finally, at the court of the emperor, which at that time was in Milan. He was driven by ambition always to seek a larger and more prominent venue for his talents.

From the post-conversion perspective of the *Confessions*, Augustine would disparage these studies because they did not bring him closer to God.

> I was obliged to memorize the wanderings of a hero named Aeneas, while in the meantime I failed to remember my own erratic ways. I learned to lament the death of Dido, who killed herself for love, while all the time, in the midst of these things, I was dying, separated from you, my God and my Life, and I shed no tears for my own plight.[24]

Yet it is clear that, then and later, he deeply cherished Virgil and the other great Latin writers. “I read and understood by myself all the books that I could find on the so-called liberal arts.”[25] He also haunted the theater and relished the elegance of Terence's comedies and the tears that tragedies could engender, though he notes the perversity of wanting to feel sorrow and sadness in a setting of make-believe. We enjoy pitying others, he explains, and therefore welcome their misfortunes on the stage and in books without truly being affected by them.

But Augustine's pleasure in literature was marred by a sense that

he did not understand the source of whatever truth and insight the works contained. “I had my back to the light and my face was turned towards the things which it illumined,” he explains in a highly Platonic trope.[26] Like the unwitting captives in Plato's cave, he did not know how to reorient himself and face the source of all illumination.

Augustine's study of rhetoric brought him naturally to Cicero, and it was through Cicero that he experienced his first intellectual and spiritual conversion. At the age of nineteen, Augustine read the now-lost *Hortensius*, Cicero's philosophical call to arms. In it, Cicero made his brief for a life spent in contemplation and in the pursuit of truth. He contended that man's highest and best calling was the love of wisdom, which transcends any particular school or set of doctrines. Cicero made Augustine question his rhetorical training, which sought to persuade rather than to discover and understand. “All my empty dreams suddenly lost their charm and my heart began to throb with a bewildering passion for the wisdom of eternal truth,” Augustine writes.[27] “I began to climb out of the depths to which I had sunk, in order to return to you.” *Hortensius* set the tone for Augustine's subsequent spiritual journey and provided him with a measuring stick against which to find his current life wanting.

Yet, even as he fell under Cicero's sway, Augustine knew that pagan philosophy alone would not satisfy him. “These were the words which excited me and set me burning with fire, and the only check to this blaze of enthusiasm was that they made no mention of the name of Christ.”[28] Having been “suckled dutifully on his name,” it was marked ineradicably in Augustine's heart, “and nothing could entirely captivate me, however learned, however neatly expressed, however true it might be, unless his name were in it.”[29] Cicero treated philosophy with a quasi-religious reverence. But, for Augustine, only the Christian religion could lead both to a purification of the soul and to knowledge of God and one's place in the universe. Augustine wanted to make the transition from pagan wisdom to Christian wisdom, from the abstract God of the philosophers to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Augustine turned naturally to the scriptures but was deeply disappointed. After Virgil and Cicero, he found the Latin Bible crude and unpolished. He was frankly appalled by the lax morality of the patriarchs of the Old Testament, who engaged in adultery, incest, and even murder. And the childish mythology of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden left him disdainful. When he turned to the New Testament, he was confronted with lengthy, contradictory genealogies of Jesus, and he put the book away in disgust.

Where was he to turn, then, in his quest for religious wisdom, for scriptures that would satisfy him both intellectually and aesthetically?

A bizarre and unlikely place, it turns out.

## THE MANICHEES

When their children leave for college, parents often are concerned for their safety, for their emotional well-being, and for how they might change, what radical views they might adopt, and what they will be like when they return. After three years studying in Carthage, Augustine returned to Thagaste with a mistress, an infant son, and the Manichaean heresy all in tow. Monica accepted the first two readily enough. But the last was worse than if Augustine had died; indeed, she shut him out of her house and mourned him as if he were dead. She relented only when a dream vision indicated to her that Augustine would return to the true faith at some point. The local bishop told her to let the boy alone, and he would grow out of his infatuation with Manichaeism: "From his own reading he will discover his mistakes and the depth of his profanity."[30] In fact, it took nine years.

Mani (216–277), a third-century Persian thinker, blended Christianity, Gnosticism, and mythology in his influential work. His central preoccupation was with the problem of evil. If God is both good and omnipotent, then how can evil exist? We cannot deny the existence of evil. Nor can we deny the goodness of God. Therefore, Mani concluded, God must not be omnipotent. Evil is inherent in material things; it is a substance that even God cannot eradicate. Otherwise, he plainly would have done so.

Mani largely rejected the Old Testament. He rejected the book of Genesis in particular. God did not create the material world and the evil that lurks within it. God did not establish his order on Earth. Mani replaced the Christian version of creation with a mythology worthy of *Star Wars*. There is, and always has been, a kingdom of light, ruled by God, and a kingdom of darkness, ruled by Satan. The kingdom of light was invaded by the kingdom of darkness, but the forces were in equilibrium. These are fundamental dualities. Neither realm could defeat the other. Yet the good was neutralized and hemmed in by evil. Fragments of God himself are scattered in the material world as particles of light shining amidst the darkness. Such is man's divine soul—pure and unsullied but surrounded by evil.

The good soul, the God within us, is never responsible for evil; evil resides in the material body that gives way to strong emotions, pride, ambition, and a lust for sex, drink, and food. The Manichaeans expressed disgust with the material world, especially with sex. They

shunned alcohol and were vegetarians. They made only the most necessary and limited concessions to the flesh. The goal of the Manichaeans was to liberate the divine soul from its captivity and to let its light shine forth amidst the darkness. Each of us, within ourselves, must refight the original battle between good and evil, between God and Satan. Perfection lies in reunion with God.

Mani selectively accepted the New Testament. Christ is our redeemer and shows us the way back to God. He is a messenger from the spiritual world. For Mani, however, Christ was wholly divine; he never became flesh, and therefore the crucifixion was symbolic rather than actual. Christ appeared to the world as a man; the word of God appeared to be made flesh. But, in fact, that was a deliberate illusion.

Manichaeism spread with surprising rapidity, notwithstanding the official status of Christianity in the Roman world. Even more surprising is that Augustine accepted it despite the absurdities of Manichaean metaphysics and mythology. He appeared to be attracted more by its criticisms of Catholicism than by its positive beliefs. He also found the problem of evil compelling, and he felt within himself the warring elements described by Mani: the pure longing of his immortal soul hemmed in by the evil longings of the flesh—neither able to eradicate the other. Augustine never became one of the “Elect” in this religion. They were pure ascetics who renounced sex, something Augustine was not prepared to do. But he remained for many years a “Hearer,” someone who subscribed to the basics of Manichaean doctrine and served the Elect. He also benefited from influential contacts within the sect as his career steadily advanced, even as he became increasingly disillusioned with Manichaean doctrines.

It is a period he will look back upon with some embarrassment in the *Confessions*, like his flirtation with astrology. But Augustine's Manichaeism was of a piece with the incident of the pears. It was only as part of a group that the temptation to this particular heresy became so compelling. Augustine valued companionship even in error. He was now the center of a group of young fellow seekers, all infatuated with Manichaeism, and he writes beautifully of their friendship:

> We could talk and laugh together and exchange small acts of kindness. We could join in the pleasure that books can give. We could be grave or gay together. If we sometimes disagreed, it was without spite, as a man might differ from himself, and the rare occasions of dispute were the very spice to season our usual accord. Each of us had something to learn from the others and something to teach in return. If any were away, we missed them with regret and gladly welcomed them when they came home. Such things as these are heartfelt tokens of affection between friends. They are signs to be read on the face and in the eyes, spoken by the tongue and

displayed in countless acts of kindness. They can kindle a blaze to melt our hearts and weld them into one.[31]

Augustine had one special friend, a boy with whom he had grown up, gone to school, and played. They had shared their interests and passions, though Augustine was the more dominant of the two. Augustine even influenced his friend to become a Manichee. It was, said Augustine, "a friendship that was sweeter to me than all the joys of life as I lived it then."[32] As with his common-law wife, however, the friend goes unnamed. These were the two most important relationships in his life after Monica, and neither is given a name. Was this to protect their privacy? His common-law wife may still have been living when he published the *Confessions*. Or was it to place Monica in higher relief? Or was it, perhaps, to universalize his experience? We cannot know, but it is a highly disturbing aspect of the book and a reflection perhaps of how painful the memory of each had become for him.

What we do know is that the friend became gravely ill in 375. Augustine was constantly by his side. His friend was baptized by his family as he lay unconscious and near death. Remarkably, he rallied. Augustine attempted to tease him about his baptism and assumed that he would reject a change in faith imposed upon him while he was senseless. But the conversion had taken hold: "He looked at me in horror as though I were an enemy, and in a strange, new-found attitude of self-reliance he warned me that if I wished to be his friend, I must never speak to him like that again."[33] Shortly thereafter, the fever returned and he died. Augustine was desolate. "I hated all the places we had known together, because he was not in them."[34] Tears alone brought relief and took the place of his friend. Unable to cope with his misery, Augustine left his native town. "For my eyes were less tempted to look for my friend in a place where they had not grown used to seeing him. So from Thagaste I went to Carthage."[35]

Time and distance helped ease the pain, filling him with fresh hope and bringing back old pleasures. But his faith in Manichaeism was shaken by his friend's profound and confident embrace of Christianity. He increasingly came to doubt the more fabulous doctrines of Manichaeism, particularly its unscientific explanations of physical phenomena. He read a great many scientific books and found the works of the Manichees incoherent by comparison. No one among his companions—whether Elect or Hearer—could answer his concerns. But they all referred him to one Faustus, a Manichaean bishop of great learning and eloquence, and Augustine eagerly awaited this encounter. It was a disappointment.

When Faustus arrived, Augustine found him eloquent and

agreeable, but little more. Augustine had wanted Faustus to bridge for him the gap between the Manichees' "tedious fictions about the sky and the stars, the sun and the moon," and the mathematical calculations he had studied in other books.[36] But Faustus proved unable to do so and, indeed, was remarkably uninformed in the liberal arts. He merely "pattered off the usual Manichean arguments with a great deal more than the usual charm."[37] Augustine felt the charm but found it a poor substitute for wisdom and knowledge. Though a teacher of rhetoric himself, Augustine wanted truth, not just fine language.

Yet Augustine did not formally renounce Manichaeism. Not yet, anyway. He still had no better set of beliefs to reorient his thinking. And he still had patrons among the Manichees, patrons who secured for him his next teaching position.

## NEOPLATONISM

In 383, at the age of twenty-eight, Augustine left Carthage for Rome. He claimed that he found the students in Carthage disruptive (perhaps as he himself had been). He also claimed, later, that it was through God's guidance that he decided upon the change. But the decision to go to Rome was clearly driven by two other factors. First, he was ambitious to showcase his talents on a bigger stage. Second, he needed to escape from his suffocating mother and "her too jealous love for her son."[38] His mother wept at his decision and followed him to the dock, "clinging to [him] with all her strength" and begging to be taken with him.[39] Augustine lied to her, telling her that, due to the lack of wind, the ship would not sail until the following day. Monica would not go home without him, but Augustine persuaded her to spend the night at a Christian shrine close to the ship. "During the night, secretly, I sailed away, leaving her alone to her tears and her prayers."[40]

Augustine went to Rome to teach literature and public speaking. He brought his mistress and their son with him. But the strain of the parting from his mother left him seriously ill, and he came close to dying a second time. This time, he did not seek baptism. He was confirmed in his sin and far from thoughts of God. He was, however, haunted by the thought that his mother would be destroyed if he died in his current state. He again recovered and, with the help of Manichaean patrons, soon obtained a position as professor of rhetoric

in Milan, which was then a more important city even than Rome, because it was the home of the emperor.

Augustine remained on friendly terms with the Manichees, even as his belief in their doctrines faded. In part, he was reluctant to break openly with those who had advanced his career. In part, he did not know where else to turn for intellectual and spiritual substance and companionship. “I had been rescued from falsehood,” he claimed, “even if I had not yet grasped the truth.”[41] Indeed, Augustine despaired for a time even of the possibility of reaching the truth. He embraced the radical skepticism of the Academy (the heirs of the school of Aristotle), in which certainty is to be found only in mathematics. Everything empirical is subject to doubt.

Yet Augustine appears to have had little doubt or uncertainty about his present course: “I sold to others the means of coming off the better in debate,” he explains.[42] He did so with no ill intent but simply to gain money and acclaim. He even composed a speech in praise of the emperor that he was confident the audience would applaud, even though they would know it was full of lies. He hoped to become the governor of a province and stood a good chance of succeeding. Only later did Augustine recognize that he was on “treacherous ground” and that the burden of ambition was crushing his soul.[43]

Monica followed her son across the sea to Milan in 385. Augustine praises her courage and piety but gives little insight into his own feelings about the unexpected reunion. Once in Milan, however, she convinced him to send his mistress home so that he could make an advantageous marriage. Monica may have been deeply religious, but she was not above promoting her son's worldly interests even at the expense of his morality. She arranged for his engagement to an heiress who was too young to marry by two years. The typical age for marriage was twelve, so she was probably only ten at the time of their engagement.

The casting off of his longtime mistress seems to the modern reader the most truly sinful and unforgivable of all the actions recounted in the *Confessions*. Augustine claims that she was “torn from my side as an obstacle to my marriage” and that “this was a blow which crushed my heart to bleeding, because I loved her dearly.”[44] Yet the decision, though couched in the third person, clearly was his own or at least was made with his acquiescence. The woman went back to Africa, vowing to know no other man, and was stripped even of Adeodatus, who remained with his father and his grandmother. Augustine mourned this woman—to whom he gave no name and no voice, and who was the pawn of his lust and his ambition—but he sent her away regardless. And Augustine, who did not wish to live without sex, took another mistress to fill the interlude before his marriage.

That marriage would never take place. Augustine began to frequent the Cathedral at Milan, where Ambrose, the influential archbishop, preached. Ambrose was highly flexible and creative in his readings of the scriptures. In his sermons, Augustine heard Old Testament passages explained allegorically, bringing out their spiritual meaning. “These passages,” Augustine notes, “had been death to me when I took them literally, but once I had heard them explained in their spiritual meaning I began to blame myself for my despair.”[45] Augustine envied Ambrose both his intellectual dexterity and his high public esteem. But still he hung back: “I wanted to be just as certain of these things which were hidden from my sight as that seven and three make ten.”[46]

The main obstacle to Augustine's belief remained his materialism. He believed in God. He had always believed in God. But he thought of God as a bodily substance; this was the only sort of existence of which he could conceive. That is what made him so susceptible to the Manichaean mythology: “This was the principal and almost the only cause of the error from which I could not escape.”[47] The good was embodied in God, evil was embodied in Satan, and the two were constantly at war with one another. As a result, he held the peculiar view that we are not responsible for our sins, for “it is not we who sin but some other nature that sins within us.”[48] The good within, which is our true self, remains unsullied; it is this “unknown thing which was in me but not part of me” that is responsible for any wrongdoing. Augustine “incurred no guilt,” because, quite literally, the devil made him do it.[49]

Augustine eventually would forge a new, more naturalistic view of human action and human responsibility. Indeed, it may be fair to claim, as some scholars do, that Augustine invented our modern concept of the will.[50] But before he could do so, he had to adopt an older, Platonic conception of the divide between the material and the spiritual. Plato, in his middle dialogues, most notably in the *Republic*, argued that a changing material world requires a permanent, unchanging realm of Ideas or Forms against which all change can be measured. These Forms are eternal, immutable, and nonphysical. They are apprehended by thought alone, and it is the job of the philosopher to transcend the shadow images of daily life in order to comprehend the deeper reality that underlies the world of appearances. Giving unity and order to this realm of pure thought is the Form of the Good.[51]

Plato enjoyed a resurgence in the third and fourth centuries. Plotinus (204/5–270), an Egyptian Greek, and his disciple Porphyry (ca. 232–ca. 305) both grounded their mystical philosophies in “the One,” the simple, primeval, and unknowable source and goal of all

that exists. The One is infinite in time and scope; it is immaterial but the source of all that is material; it informs everything but is limited by nothing. The One alone is perfectly good. These Neoplatonists, as they are known to us, envisioned a Great Chain of Being, from lower to higher creatures, that both emanates from and culminates in the One. The soul of man partakes of the One but is also mired in time and space. To the extent it is defective, the soul turns away from the One. The body pulls down the soul and wrongly focuses it on material things, which can never bring truth or fulfillment. We must strive instead to purge material influences and become as much as possible a pure soul in union with the One.

The Neoplatonists were not necessarily Christians—indeed, Porphyry was quite hostile to Christianity—but their views heavily informed Christian doctrine and deeply influenced Augustine in two main respects. First, they changed his conception of God and gave him the beginnings of a new vocabulary. Plato's Good, Plotinus's One, and the God of Christianity all merged in his mind as the undivided, unchanging, and eternal spiritual source of all being. Augustine broke from his prior materialism and hence was finally able to put the Manichaean mythology behind him.

The second point is related to the first: the Neoplatonists changed Augustine's conception of evil. In the Neoplatonic system, evil is without substance; it is simply a shortfall in true being. Evil is the absence of the good, a natural defect of an inferior level of being. Instead of the static, Manichaean system in which good and evil do eternal battle, the Neoplatonists believed a process of ascension was possible, a process of intellectual and spiritual growth toward the good. Plato, in his *Symposium*, called it the "Ladder of Love."[52] For Augustine, evil became not a primeval force in its own right, but rather the absence of God, a turning away from God toward the material world, which implied the equal possibility of turning toward God and away from the material world. Good and evil became competing aspects of a free will.

What Augustine did not find in the Neoplatonists, however, was how to bridge the divide between the material and the immaterial, between the world and God, between the flesh and the word. The Neoplatonists could point to the end they sought but not to the means to obtain it: "But I did not read in them that the Word was made flesh."[53] What was missing was Christ as the mediator and the way. "I utterly refused to entrust the healing of the maladies of my soul to these philosophers," Augustine explains, "because they ignored the saving name of Christ."[54] Without accepting the incarnation, the crucifixion, and the resurrection, Augustine believed that he would find no peace from the insatiable longing and restless imagining that

still drove him. So he turned from the philosophers to Saint Paul, whom he read closely and repeatedly. Augustine became increasingly convinced by Christian doctrine as an abstract matter. All that was lacking was the will to realize the word in his own life.

## CONVERSION

Twelve years after he had first read Cicero's *Hortensius* and was fired by a passion for truth and wisdom, Augustine found himself "still floundering in the same quagmire, because I was greedy to enjoy what the world had to offer, though it only eluded me and wasted my strength."[55] Baptism at that time was not something to be taken lightly. A conversion to Christianity was not an hour-every-Sunday commitment. Ambrose taught, and Augustine believed, that it required a dramatic renunciation of the world. Intellectually, Augustine was there, but emotionally he was not ready. "I was eager for fame and wealth and marriage."[56] So he procrastinated and was miserable in his uncertainty.

Augustine presents a brilliantly compressed mock dialogue with himself in which all the phases of his intellectual and spiritual journey are exposed as excuses for this delay. Always, "tomorrow I shall discover the truth."[57] Faustus will come and explain everything. The Academics have shown that we can never know for certain how we should live our lives. The scripture passages have a deeper meaning, but it eludes me. My students keep me constantly busy. Suppose death puts an end to all. That is unthinkable; we must abandon our worldly hopes. "But not so fast! This life too is sweet."[58] If I just wait a bit more I can win a position of standing in the world and marry a wife with a sufficient dowry. Then I can dedicate myself to the pursuit of wisdom. "As I reasoned with myself in this way," he notes, "my heart was buffeted hither and thither by winds blowing from opposite quarters."[59]

Augustine was, he frankly admits, afraid to give up worldly hopes and pleasures. Instead of fearing to be held back by all that encumbered him, he was "frightened to be free of it."[60] He was frightened of the weightless void that awaited a plunge into religion. He did not want to dedicate himself to God. Yet, in another sense, he longed to do just that. He was at war within himself, or rather, the "two wills within" him were at war with one another.[61]

Augustine had come to recognize that knowledge of the good alone could not determine action. This was a sharp departure from

Plato, who thought that to know the good was to do the good. *Akrasia* (failure of will) was not acknowledged in Plato, but Augustine (following Aristotle) makes it the centerpiece of his philosophy and psychology. We may long for God, but we are mired in habits acquired over time, habits once freely chosen that have become necessities: “the rule of sin is the force of habit, by which the mind is swept along and held fast even against its will, yet deservedly, because it fell into the habit of its own accord.”[62] His new will, which had grown up to serve God, “was not yet strong enough to overcome the old, hardened as it was by the passage of time.”[63] Thus, the new will and the old were in conflict, “and between them they tore my soul apart.”[64]

Augustine felt able to renounce honor and wealth. Sex was the sticking point: “I was still held firm in the bonds of woman's love.”[65] Since adolescence he had prayed to the Lord, in what is surely the most famous line in the *Confessions*: “Give me chastity and continence, but not yet.”[66] Only a dramatic and complete change could, with God's grace, break this final link in the chain that bound his heart to this earth.

That dramatic change came in August 386, when Augustine was thirty-one. He took refuge in the small garden attached to the house where he lived with his mother, his son, and his close friend Alypius. Augustine wanted the struggle within to reach its conclusion without interruption. “I was beside myself with madness that would bring me sanity,” he writes. “I was dying a death that would bring me life.”[67] He tore his hair, struck his forehead, and hugged his knees. All these things, he noted, he could do with a simple act of will. The mind willed, and the body obeyed. But he could not will obedience from his own mind; he could not devote himself wholly to God, because the command was not given with the full will.[68] In his heart he repeated, “Let it be now!”[69] He was on the brink of resolution and yet still could not reach out and grasp his goal. “The closer I came to the moment which was to mark the great change in me, the more I shrank from it in horror.”[70]

In the midst of this crisis, Augustine heard a small child's singsong voice from a nearby house repeating, again and again, “*Tolle, lege*” (“Take it and read, take it and read.”).[71] Viewing this voice as a divine command, Augustine rushed to pick up the book of Saint Paul's epistles that he had just recently put down. He opened it randomly and read the first passage to come before his eyes: “Not in revelling and drunkenness, not in lust and wantonness, not in quarrels and rivalries. Rather, arm yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ; spend no more thought on nature and nature's appetites.”[72]

Once he read this passage, Augustine explains, the tension

evaporated and his will became whole. He had no need to read further, for "it was as though the light of confidence flooded into [his] heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled."[73] Alypius joined Augustine in his new resolution, and together they told Monica, who was "jubilant with triumph."[74] She felt that her prayers were answered and that the dream she had so many years before was finally fulfilled.

Augustine, Alypius, and Adeodatus were all baptized by Ambrose eight months later, on Easter Saturday, April 24, 387. After the baptism, Augustine quietly resigned his teaching position, broke with his fiancée, and made plans to return to North Africa to form a monastic community. At Ostia, before they sailed, Augustine and his mother shared a mystical vision. They were leaning from a window that overlooked the garden of the house where they were staying, talking softly about the eternal Wisdom which abides over all things.

> As the flame of love burned stronger in us and raised us higher towards the eternal God, our thoughts ranged over the whole compass of material things in their various degrees, up to the heavens themselves, from which the sun and the moon and the stars shine down upon the earth. Higher still we climbed, thinking and speaking all the while in wonder at all that you have made.... And while we spoke of the eternal Wisdom, longing for it and straining for it with all the strength of our hearts, for one fleeting instant we reached out and touched it. Then with a sigh, leaving *our spiritual harvest* bound to it, we returned to the sound of our own speech, in which each word has a beginning and an ending—far, far different from your Word, our Lord, who abides in himself for ever, yet never grows old and gives new life to all things.[75]

This mystical vision—in which their souls united together in God—was the last thing shared by mother and son. Within two weeks, Monica was dead, as if giving Augustine a second birth into eternal life had exhausted both her purpose and her strength. Augustine ends book 9 and the narrative portion of the *Confessions* with a moving tribute to the woman who gave him everything—"for her life and mine had been as one"—and yet, in the end, asked only to be remembered at the altar of the Lord.[76]

## SPEAK, MEMORY

Augustine founded his monastic community in his hometown of

Thagaste. It was a lay community; the participants, though pledged to celibacy and a renunciation of worldly goods, were not priests. Augustine was content to lead a life of contemplation and quiet fellowship, serving his religion through a prodigious outpouring of written works. His son, Adeodatus, died at the age of seventeen. Augustine notes his brilliance and his goodness but is otherwise silent as to his own feelings at what must have seemed a final loss of all that tied him to his prior life.

In 391, while visiting Hippo, Augustine was pressed by the congregation, at the instigation of their aging bishop, Valerius, to take holy orders as a priest. In 396, he became cobishop and, after the death of Valerius, sole bishop of Hippo, a position he retained until his own death in 430, still astonishingly productive despite the many daily demands of the church.

Augustine finished the *Confessions* in 398. Although the narrative of his conversion ends with book 9, the story does not end there, as certain Victorian novels end in marriage and a bland promise that the finally united couple will live happily ever after. Faith is a challenge, not a resting place. Augustine's attempt to understand and to live his faith is just beginning. This attempt is not a break from but rather a continuation of his earlier narrative on a more abstract plane. The personal now merges with the doctrinal. As Eileen Sweeney explains in her important book on medieval thought, “There is in Augustine a seamless synthesis between the technical, analytic problems of language and theology and the spiritual/existential project of mapping a journey to God both for himself and as a model to others.”[77] Emmet Flood, a philosopher turned lawyer, puts the same point slightly differently: “in a manner evocative of the vision with Monica, the trajectory of the *Confessions* becomes increasingly vertical.”[78]

Augustine's central goal in the final four books of the *Confessions* is to trace both the limits and the possibilities of our attempts to understand and approach God. He begins by confronting the inherent inadequacy of language to religious expression. Augustine had already described his own learning of language as a child as a process by which words become associated with things:

> I noticed that people would name some object and then turn towards whatever it was that they had named. I watched them and understood that the sound they made when they wanted to indicate that particular thing was the name which they gave to it.[79]

In book 10, he develops this conception of language—words name things, and we learn the meaning of words by perceiving the things that they name—by exploring the crucial role of memory.[80] The word

*book* can only stand for a book if I retain an image in my mind of what a book is and the word calls forth that image. Words are merely sounds or marks on paper. It is the mind that infuses them with meaning. It does so by associating images with the words in an act of memory. The images provide the meaning of the words. The images also connect us with things. They mediate between words and things and thus allow us to use words to express our desires. We can anticipate things that are not at present before us, through images stored in our memories.

Memory "is like a great field or a spacious palace, a storehouse for countless images of all kinds which are conveyed to it by the senses."[81] We remember, and separately store, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Without such images, we could not use words as signs for things: "I could not even mention them at all if the images were lacking."[82] Augustine expands his conception of language to words for feelings and emotions, which are present to the mind when we experience them and thus can be assigned names.

Augustine considers the entire phenomenon of memory to be something both miraculous and mysterious. This vast, immeasurable sanctuary is somewhere inside us:

> Yet men go out and gaze in astonishment at high mountains, the huge waves of the sea, the broad reaches of rivers, the ocean that encircles the world, or the stars in their courses. But they pay no attention to themselves. They do not marvel at the thought that while I have been mentioning all these things, I have not been looking at them with my eyes, and that I could not even speak of mountains or waves, rivers or stars, which are things that I have seen, or of the ocean, which I know only on the evidence of others, unless I could see them in my mind's eye, in my memory, and with the same vast spaces between them that would be there if I were looking at them in the world outside myself.[83]

Sentences—which are combinations of names—can also signify facts. In such cases, "it is not their images that I store in my memory but the facts themselves."[84] Our memory thus embraces "all that [we] have ever learnt of the liberal sciences, except what [we] have forgotten."[85] The abstractions of logic and mathematics are also present in memory, although we do not learn them as facts about the world. Following Plato, Augustine suggests that "they must have been in my mind even before I learned them, though not present to my memory."[86] Learning to recognize them, sorting them out in the mind, is "a process of thought by which we gather together things which, although they are muddled and confused, are already contained in the memory."[87]

Augustine comes up short, however, before God. Our memories

encompass material things, by virtue of their images, as well as knowledge, emotions, ideas, and impressions. Our minds may freely range over them all. “This is the great force of life in living man, mortal though he is!”[88] But we must go beyond, or rather behind, memory if we are to reach God. Our images, experiences, and thoughts about God do not contain him. God does not exist in space, and we cannot form an image of him. We have no memory of God himself but only what we have been told about him. We cannot therefore seek God in our memories as if we had forgotten him but still remember having forgotten.

Not only is God outside space, he is outside time. God created time, as he created space. Yet he is contained in neither. “It must therefore be that *you spoke and they were made*. In your Word alone you created them.”[89] Human speech takes place in time, as syllable follows syllable. The word of God, which alone created all things, “is silent and eternal.”[90]

> For your Word is not speech in which each part comes to an end when it has been spoken, giving place to the next, so that finally the whole may be uttered. In your Word all is uttered at one and the same time, yet eternally. If it were not so, your Word would be subject to time and change, and therefore would be neither truly eternal nor truly immortal.[91]

Before God created heaven and earth, there was no time. There was no past. There was no “then.” But, for us, time is never still. Try as we might to “savour the taste of eternity, [our] thoughts still twist and turn upon the ebb and flow of things in past and future time.”[92]

“What, then, is time?” Augustine asks. “I know well enough what it is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled.”[93] The past no longer is; the future is not yet. But the present is part of time only insofar as it moves on to become the past. The present is but an instant; indeed, it is less than an instant; its duration is without length, for it could otherwise be divided into past and future. Time, then, is nothing, “coming out of what does not yet exist, passing through what has no duration, and moving into what no longer exists.”[94] Time lives only in memory, just as language does. Even anticipation is a form of memory since it projects onto the future images and ideas taken from the past.

Memory is therefore critical to give unity to otherwise disconnected experiences and hence to the identity of the self and its continuity through time. It is, of course, through an act of memory that Augustine presents his own narrative and provides coherence to the disparate events of his life through time. Without memory, autobiography would be impossible, as would language and any sort

of knowledge. By combining past, present, and future in memory, Augustine can impose a narrative on his life and his search for God.

But, for a man's or woman's life to be truly intelligible, it is not enough to view that life in time. Our time-bound lives are comprehensible only as an expression of the goodness of God.[95] But God is outside time. It is impossible for humans to see the world as God sees it, *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the perspective of eternity.

From all this, it follows that our language—which focuses on images and expresses desires in space and time—is inherently inadequate to speak of God. We can speak, as Louis Mackey puts it, "words about the Word," but not the Word itself.[96] We cannot capture in words a complete image or idea of God. We cannot articulate the perspective of God. The word of God is ineffable. Our language is a reflection of our fallen state; it is derived from and focused on things in space and time rather than the eternal and immaterial source of all things. In heaven, Augustine believes, words will be unnecessary. We will exist outside space and time in a mystical union with the Word that is God. But our current lives unravel in space and time, and only words hold them together. There is an unbridgeable gap between our words and the Word of God.

And yet language does gesture toward God. Words signify things, but all things in turn signify God, who is the Word itself; he is the source of all things and hence all words.[97] Indeed, the very paradoxes Augustine presents—of memory (which has no space but can contain all that exists in space) and anticipation (which can desire what does not yet exist and, since the present has no duration, never will exist)—can help lead us to God by underscoring the mysteries of life in space and time, mysteries that can be resolved only in God. God is not in space or time, but both space and time were made possible through his creation. Although we cannot form an image of God or attain the eternal perspective of God, we can experience God from within, however partially and inadequately, because our souls derive from and partake of God. God is not contained in our memories, and yet he is somehow present there. God's Truth speaks to us, deep inside, "though not in syllables formed by lips and tongue."[98] We see him, as Saint Paul put it, "through a glass, darkly."[99]

Moreover, Augustine insists, God has met us more than halfway. Language, even in its degraded condition, can lead us back to God, and God himself has shown us how in the divinely inspired scriptures. "What my Scripture says, I say," writes Augustine, assuming the "voice" of God. "But the Scripture speaks in time, whereas time does not affect my Word, which stands for ever, equal with me in eternity."[100] Since even the scriptures are necessarily, in the end, just words about the Word, they are written as a kind of code or signpost,

with multiple levels of meaning.

> How wonderful are your Scriptures! How profound! We see their surface and it attracts us like children. And yet, O my God, their depth is stupendous. We shudder to peer deep into them, for they inspire in us both the awe of reverence and the thrill of love.[101]

Augustine, following Ambrose, takes an aggressively allegorical approach to the scriptures. We as readers, he notes, can find in them "whichever meaning sheds the fullest light of truth and enables us to reap the greatest profit."[102] No single interpretation can be imposed upon them. There are "so many meanings, all of them acceptable as true."[103] The only relevant criterion is that our readings bring us closer to the divine reality that lies beyond all words.

That is the same criterion against which Augustine would have us judge the *Confessions*. "If I were called upon to write a book which was to be vested with the highest authority," Augustine explains, "I should prefer to write it in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in my words whatever truths he was able to apprehend."[104] Rather than impose his version of truth upon the readers, he would have them find their own meanings in his words. That is why, throughout the book, he offers the reader multiple interpretations of his own actions. He urges his reader to look behind his own account to find the higher truth in it. That is also why he interweaves scriptural quotations with his prose-poem to God, for if God can use words to convey his gospel to men, then men can use words in their confession to God. The scriptural quotations are not footnoted or italicized or otherwise singled out in his manuscript. That is the work of later editors. Augustine incorporates them seamlessly into his prayer; they have become part of his own memory and part of the narrative of his return to God.

By the time he came to write the *Confessions*, Augustine had already realized that the mixed Platonic/Christian ideal of a pure mind in contemplation of a higher reality was just that: an ideal. The tension between good and evil, spirit and flesh, can never be resolved in this world. That tension is not to be perceived in Manichaean terms as a constant battle of competing substances in the world, but rather as an internal struggle of each individual to direct himself or herself toward the spiritual. With the help of God and his intermediary, Christ, we can obtain glimpses of eternity. But Augustine rejected the classical ideal of perfection in favor of a longing that can never be realized in this world but is our only hope in the next:

> Whoever thinks that in this mortal life a man may so disperse the mists of bodily and carnal imaginings as to possess the unclouded light of changeless truth, and to cleave to it with the unswerving constancy of a spirit wholly estranged from the common ways of life—he understands neither what he seeks, nor who he is who seeks it.[105]

Augustine accordingly recognizes that his *Confessions* necessarily is a failure. To obtain the perspective he wants on his life, the book would have to be written by God; instead, it is written by a fallen man striving to return to God. Yet Plato's metaphor of the cave still holds in a sense. We can turn away from material things and haltingly approach divine illumination, even if we can never fully reach it in this mortal life. In the *Confessions*, as even in the scriptures themselves, the word of God is presupposed and yet inevitably eludes us. As Louis Mackey puts it, "Mythically recalled, prophetically foreseen, always desired, it is never possessed."[106]

## THE CITY OF GOD

In 410, Rome was sacked by Alaric and his Goths. The event had a psychological impact on Augustine and other Christians out of proportion to its practical effects. Since Rome was by then a Christian city, and the symbolic (if no longer the actual) seat of the western empire, Christians expected it to be protected by God. Indeed, Constantine converted largely because he thought the Christian God was fighting on his side in 312 at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge. How was one now to make sense of a world in which the Christian empire was overthrown? Many people thought the fall of Rome was a sign of the displeasure of the ancient Roman deities, neglected in favor of the Christian God. Even the great Edward Gibbon would later attribute the fall of Rome to the rise of Christianity (albeit without any need for intervention by more ancient gods). To add to the irony, Alaric himself was at least nominally a Christian.

Augustine spent fifteen years after the sack of Rome writing his second masterwork, *City of God*, to offer his own interpretation of this history. He contrasted two cities: the City of Man (most notably, Rome) and the City of God. He did not mourn Rome, for the cities of men are inherently imperfect and doomed to fail, focused as they are on the pleasures and concerns of this world, which invite strife and discord. The current calamities are not caused by jealous and neglected gods but are rather inevitable by-products of the fallen

human condition. The City of God, by contrast, should be dedicated to the eternal truths of God as revealed in the Christian religion. The City of God is an ideal that will never fully be realized in this world but should serve as a constant aspiration. Augustine sketched his City of God in sharp contrast to the secular republics touted by Plato and Cicero and the far less perfect republic of ancient Rome.

*City of God*, for better or worse, became the blueprint for the post-empire Catholic Church, whose authority would reach into towns and hamlets throughout the Western world. In the coming centuries in western Europe, pagan learning would all too often be seen not just as an inadequate path to God, but as anathema to a church focused on a radically different means of making sense of man's place in the universe. The infrastructure for maintaining secular learning would soon collapse, and many classical works would be irretrievably lost. This was not what Augustine, or his most important successor, Boethius, envisioned. Yet, in the Byzantine Empire to the east (which considered itself to be the true, never fallen Roman Empire), in the Arab world centered on Alexandria, in the scriptoria of scattered monasteries, and in the cathedral schools and nascent universities of western Europe in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, classical learning was preserved and cherished in its own right. Augustine died on August 28, 430, at the age of seventy-six. He died as Vandals were besieging Hippo, yet another city they would soon overrun. But he died as one of history's greatest advocates of the never-ending search for truth and the seamless interplay between the personal and the doctrinal.

# Chapter 3

# BOETHIUS

## The Classical Tradition on Trial

Samuel Johnson famously said, “Depend upon it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully.”[1] Johnson was speaking largely in jest or at least by misdirection to avoid revealing that he was the author of a work attributed to a convict. But, to Boethius, the quotation applies in deadly earnest. Falsely condemned for treason in 524, in prison and awaiting death, Boethius concentrated his mind wonderfully to produce a remarkable distillation of ancient wisdom in alternating passages of poetry and prose.

*The Consolation of Philosophy*, written about 125 years after Augustine's *Confessions*, puts the claims of philosophy to the ultimate and most direct human test. When he was free and blessed by fortune, Boethius wore his philosophical learning proudly, with ease and confidence. Now he is stripped of all adornments: money, comfort, position, library, and erstwhile friends; even his life will soon be forfeited. Can philosophy help him to obtain, or rather to regain, a perspective that will not only alleviate his misery but also give him a measure of contentment and even joy? Can philosophy reconcile him to a world in which the evil all too often triumph and the good suffer wrongs? In other words, can philosophy accomplish, on its own, what Augustine thought was reserved for divine revelation?

In attempting to answer these questions, Boethius tries on doctrines developed by multiple Greek and Roman predecessors; Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, the Neoplatonists, Cicero, and Seneca are

all recognizable in his pages. He also combines multiple prose genres. As the title indicates, he adopts the “consolation” form, which is directed by convention to a single, suffering individual but employs arguments of more universal application. (Here, however, the convention is reversed since it is Boethius who receives consolation from the allegorical figure of Philosophy. Or, put another way, Boethius the author is providing the consolation to Boethius the prisoner.) He includes set speeches along with passages of closely developed philosophical argument of the sort found in essays and treatises. Much of the book, however, takes the form of philosophical dialogue, a format employed by Plato, Cicero, Saint Augustine, and others. The *Consolation* is modeled most closely on the *Phaedo*, the Platonic dialogue in which Socrates, in prison and awaiting his own execution, pauses to discuss the immortality of the soul and the nature of human existence before drinking the hemlock his jailor has prepared for him.

There is also a parallel and equally important dialogue between the poetry and the prose. Drawing heavily on Virgil, Ovid, and Seneca's plays, Boethius presents us with a dazzling array of Latin poetic styles; pastoral, didactic, lyric, elegiac, epic, and dramatic poems are interleaved with the prose passages, serving as illustrations and independent embodiments of ancient wisdom. These “musical” interludes are critical to the process of reeducation, which reason alone cannot complete. Poetry and prose together are needed to bring about a full cure of what ails the prisoner. The distinguished medievalist Seth Lerer may be too enamored of modern literary theory when he suggests in his introduction to one translation that “Boethius makes clear that all experience is a rereading of the past, that life is made up of the books we have read.”[2] But, certainly, the *Consolation* draws heavily upon the classics in recounting one man's effort to come to grips with injustice and cruelty and the apparent futility of virtue.

Not only philosophy, narrowly construed, but the entire classical tradition is thus on trial here. Just as he weighs his own life in the face of its imminent eclipse, Boethius weighs the value of the classical tradition in the face of its imminent eclipse in the Dark Ages to come. By means of that tradition, he provides the prisoner (and hence his readers) with an ever broader and more encompassing perspective on life. He moves from the simple to the complex, from the commonsense to the esoteric. In the process, he reevaluates what he has learned to value falsely and rediscovers his own nature, which has been lost amid worldly concerns. As Eileen Sweeney explains, “Each step toward this new perspective brings with it a new language, with the radical redefinition of the terms in which Boethius at the beginning misunderstands his fate—fortune, freedom, happiness, justice, virtue,

chance, and, ultimately, good and evil."[3] He does not escape suffering, but Boethius changes the terms in which he thinks about it and thereby rises above his fate. Exiled, chained, imprisoned, and condemned, he nonetheless attains an inviolate measure of freedom and happiness.

It is a remarkable transformation. Not all the arguments made by the character, Philosophy, are good ones. Indeed, not even Boethius the prisoner accepts them all. But the prisoner grows in confidence and understanding, and the reader grows along with him. In the end, Boethius affirms the fundamental goodness of God and his plan for the universe, and he locates man's highest good in a union with that God. Whether or not the modern reader finds such answers compelling proves less important than grappling with the questions Boethius raises.

While *The Consolation of Philosophy* is a profoundly religious book, it is not a Christian one. There is no mention of the incarnation of Christ, the resurrection, or the Christian scriptures. The God in the *Consolation* is an abstract God—well known to Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics—not the personal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as revealed in the Bible, much less the Father who gave his only begotten Son to bring salvation to men. Yet Boethius was certainly a Christian. He even wrote a series of treatises explicating Christian doctrines. So why, unlike for Augustine, does Christianity play no role in the consolation of the prisoner Boethius facing his darkest hour? That is a question we ourselves have to grapple with as readers and fellow travelers.

## LIFE AND TIMES

The birth of Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius coincided roughly with the official end of the western empire. Since 395, the eastern and western empires had been divided and separately ruled. The western empire shrank dramatically as barbarian kingdoms were established (or, more accurately, reestablished) in Britain, Spain, Gaul, and elsewhere. In August 476, the last of the western emperors, Romulus Augustus, was deposed by the Germanic tribal leader Odoacer.

Surprisingly, however, not much changed. Odoacer (sometimes known as Odovacer) acted with some reluctance and only after repeated promises of land and funds for his *foederati* (German tribes affiliated with the western empire) went unfulfilled. Although he

preserved the forms of imperial government, Odoacer did not have himself declared emperor. He was content to be considered governor (or king) of Italy, nominally subject to the eastern emperor. Although Odoacer resided in Ravenna—as had Romulus Augustus and a number of the earlier western emperors—the center of administration and the church remained in Rome. Prominent senatorial families still clung to wealth and prestige and the perquisites of office, though their power was largely illusory. Even the ousted Romulus was generously pensioned off to a quiet but comfortable retirement in Campania.

Odoacer, like most of the German tribesmen, was an Arian Christian. According to the Arians, Christ was created by and therefore inferior to God, not "one in being with the Father" as the Nicene Creed recites. After a lengthy period of controversy, Arianism had been officially declared a heresy with the adoption of the Nicene Creed in 381 at the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople. But, by that time, Arian missionaries had already achieved notable success in converting the German tribes, and the heresy persisted. Odoacer, however, was perfectly tolerant of orthodox Nicene Christianity and made no attempt to impose his views on Italy. Nor did he seek to check the growing power of the church.

Boethius was born to an ancient, aristocratic landed Roman family, the Anicii, sometime between 475 and 480. The Anicii boasted two emperors and a pope in their heritage. Boethius's father became consul under Odoacer in 487 but died shortly thereafter. Boethius was then adopted into the even more prestigious family of Symmachus, who had been consul in 485. Boethius subsequently married Symmachus's daughter Rusticiana.

Boethius received a superb education in Greek and Latin classics as well as early Christian works by Augustine and others. He was a scholar of Greek philosophy in particular. He even announced that, if he was "granted enough life and leisure," he planned to translate and prepare commentaries on all the writings of Plato and Aristotle, both to preserve them and to demonstrate that their views were harmonious with one another despite surface disagreements.[4] Unfortunately, he was granted neither the life nor the leisure and completed only the Aristotelian works on logic and one by Porphyry commenting on Aristotle's *Categories*.

The eastern emperor Zeno grew increasingly wary of the growing power of Odoacer. He was equally concerned with the growing power of Theodoric, king of the Ostrogoths, within the eastern empire's own borders. Seeking a solution to both problems at once, Zeno promised Theodoric and his Ostrogoths control of Italy if they defeated Odoacer. Theodoric set out to do so in 489. Despite considerable initial success, however, he could not capture Ravenna, which was easily defended

because of its extensive marshes. The bishop of Ravenna finally negotiated a power-sharing arrangement in 493 that brought Theodoric into Ravenna. Theodoric promptly killed Odoacer over dinner by thrusting a sword through his neck, and then had Odoacer's family and as many of his followers as possible killed. Theodoric was now king of Italy, though still nominally subject to the eastern emperor.

In Rome, once again, nothing much changed. Boethius enjoyed largely ceremonial success in politics. He became consul in 510, still in his early thirties. Both his sons were made consuls in 522, a significant honor and the proudest moment of his life. Theodoric consulted him on various matters—recommending a harpist; choosing a water clock and sundial as gifts for Clovis, king of the Franks—but Boethius remained in Rome and devoted himself to his scholarly pursuits. In addition to his translations and commentaries, he wrote influential texts on music, mathematics, rhetoric, astronomy, and theology.

Boethius's quiet life changed dramatically in 523, when he agreed to become *magister officiorum* (Master of the King's Offices), an intimate advisor of Theodoric. He claimed that he took the position only out of a sense of duty and obligation. Cicero had made similar protestations to justify his own ambitions during the last days of the republic. Perhaps Boethius was more sincere. Regardless, he moved to Ravenna and disaster.

Boethius excited the jealousy of Theodoric's existing Ostrogoth advisors. Theodoric was persuaded to accuse Boethius of treason within a year of his arrival in Ravenna, and he was sent to prison in Pavia, outside of Milan. Boethius analyzes the specific charges in *The Consolation of Philosophy*. The principal one was that he conspired with the eastern emperor (then Justin I, uncle of Justinian the Great) against Theodoric. There may have been some truth to the charges. Justin had issued a decree against Arians within the eastern empire, which heightened tensions with Theodoric, who sent Pope John I as his emissary to Constantinople to insist that the decree be moderated on pain of reprisals against non-Arian Christians in the west. Boethius appears to have favored a strengthening of ties—both religious and political—between east and west. He supported the Nicene Creed against Arianism. And he may have sympathized with those who wanted to reunite east and west under a single emperor. Yet he denies any form of treason against Theodoric and insists that his enemies presented false witnesses and forged documents against him.

While in prison, Boethius had just “enough life and leisure” to write his masterwork, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. He had no access

to his library but had so thoroughly absorbed the classical tradition that the books themselves were now largely superfluous. He must have had some visitors who safeguarded his manuscript, however, for the work is highly critical of Theodoric and his administration and likely would not have survived otherwise. Internal evidence suggests that Boethius wrote his book knowing that he would soon be executed. He was murdered sometime in 525 or 526. The arrest and execution of his father-in-law, Symmachus, soon followed. Pope John I also was thrown into prison, where he quickly died. Theodoric himself died in 526, and with him most of the remaining vestiges of the western empire disappeared. The eastern empire lasted almost another millennium.

## BOOK ONE: BOETHIUS THE PRISONER

*The Consolation of Philosophy* begins with a not very good poem. It is an elegiac lament in which the prisoner Boethius complains about "faithless Fortune," who once favored but has now abandoned him. He longs for death, and his only solace, such as it is, lies in indulging his misery with tears and bad poetry.

The prisoner Boethius, it is vital to remind ourselves, is a character in a book written by Boethius. The latter can no more be equated naively with the former than Dante with his Pilgrim, or Proust with his narrator Marcel, or the historical Socrates with the Socrates of the Platonic Dialogues. Boethius the author knows that the opening poem is full of bathos. Boethius the prisoner does not, at least not yet. Boethius lies on the bed of his cell in a profound stupor, shocked into insensibility by his sudden reversal and by what he perceives as the injustice of his current condition. He wallows in the slough of despond, as John Bunyan's Christian would later encounter it in *The Pilgrim's Progress*. But at this, his darkest hour, a woman appears above Boethius, a woman with glowing eyes and a face that demands reverence. She is simultaneously youthful and ancient, of normal height and yet goddess-like in stature. Her robe is perfectly finished but already bears the "gloom of untended antiquity, such as is found on the smoke-covered death masks of one's ancestors."[5] It is a striking and surprising image, and the reader realizes that she, too, may prove to need some consolation.

Her gown has also been torn by violent hands. On it are emblazoned the Greek letters *pi* (for practical wisdom) and *theta* (for theoretical wisdom), with the steps of a ladder going between the two.

She represents, then, the entire hierarchy of ancient learning, from the empirical to the most esoteric. And the question immediately posed by her presence is whether that ancient learning will be sufficient to recall Boethius to his better self, to free him from his current, debased condition.

The Platonic symbolism is evident even in this opening scene and will be elaborated in what follows. Boethius's prison is the counterpart of Plato's cave in the *Republic*. In Plato's allegory, we mortals are in a cave, with legs and neck fettered, observing only the shadows of things cast upon the wall by a weak fire. The philosopher must break those chains and struggle up and out of the cave to see things in their true light, illuminated by the eternal form of the Good.[6] Boethius's plight, we are given to understand, is not so much his mortal peril as his failure of knowledge and understanding.

The letter *theta* provides a further level of complexity to the symbolism, however, for it was the custom to stamp the clothes of prisoners with that letter to stand for *thanatos* (death) and to indicate that the prisoner was marked for execution.[7] Boethius himself may have worn the letter *theta* in prison. Its presence on the gown of the mysterious woman thus bears a double meaning—that death is the only complete release from Plato's cave (a view developed in the *Phaedo*) and that the learning she represents may also stand condemned.

The first thing this unnamed woman does is banish the shadowy Muses from Boethius's bedside. She calls them “little stage whores” and “Sirens, sweet unto shipwreck.”[8] They can play no part in the cure of the prisoner; indeed, they make him worse with their poisonous passions. The prisoner lies mutely, staring at the ground as the disgraced Muses are driven from the room. The woman then sits on the side of the bed and delivers a poem of her own with the impact of a slap in the face. She mocks Boethius's current lethargy and confusion. She recalls a time when his mind ranged over the entire span of human knowledge—the paths of the planets and stars, the beauty of numbers, and nature's root causes:

> Now here he lies, and his mind's brightness is barren;
> Weighed down, draped over his neck ponderous shackles,
> Wearing a face that looks down, bent by the dead weight—
> Woe is him! truly coerced he stares at the hard earth.[9]

After this tonic rebuke, she grows gentle and promises to recall Boethius to himself, to restore the strength and vigor of his mind, and to arm him once again with the weapons he needs to be unconquerable. She dries his eyes with the cloth of her own robe and

dispels the clouds of depression swirling about him. Only then is he able to look at her, focus his vision, and recognize “my nurse, in whose house and in whose presence I had dwelt since I was a child—Philosophy.”[10]

She begins with a talking cure, urging Boethius to unlock his mind and “uncover [his] wound.”[11] In practicing this technique, ancient Philosophy shows herself to be very modern indeed. But the talking cure serves a double purpose in the book. Boethius the author can justify himself and explain that the charges against him were fabricated and that he is a victim of injustice. At the same time, Boethius the prisoner can lift some of the weight that is oppressing him simply by giving voice to his complaints. He proceeds to do so over seven pages, and he starts by directing some anger and resentment at Philosophy herself. (Freud will call this “transference.”)

Boethius expresses amazement that Philosophy should wonder what ails him, given his change in circumstances. Just look around, he urges her. Is this the beautiful library, finished in ivory and glass, where he pursued his researches and where Philosophy would visit him to speak of knowledge, both human and divine? Is not this miserable prison cell sufficient explanation for his condition? He then blames Philosophy for his current predicament. She taught him Plato's view that a state should be ruled by those devoted to wisdom, and he believed her. He stresses that “no enthusiasm brought me to high office other than the enthusiasm for the community of all good people.”[12] Yet he no sooner took on this obligation than he met with resistance and injustice. Those with more power resented his attempts to curb their abuses and to protect the weak, “whom the barbarians’ greed, perpetually unpunished, would constantly harass with infinite indignities.”[13]

He then turns to the particulars that led to his arrest. One of the senators, Albinus, was accused of treason for communications with the eastern emperor. Theodoric, “impatient for our universal downfall,” sought to expand the charges against the entire Senate.[14] Boethius leapt to their defense, stating, in effect, that they were no more guilty than he was. It was a courageous, if perhaps unwise, pronouncement. False witnesses and forged documents were quickly produced against him. To the charge of treason, moreover, was added a claim that Boethius, given his constant congress with Philosophy, trafficked in black magic. Boethius was imprisoned five hundred miles from Rome and tried in absentia. The bitterest betrayal of all was that it was the cowed Senate that voted his conviction and condemnation. Now he lies here, exiled, stripped of possessions and office, and disgraced in public opinion. Innocence is condemned; the wicked are not just unpunished but rewarded “while God is watching over it—this is like

some monstrosity."[15] Boethius ends with an angry poem noting that the Creator imposes order on the heavens, the seasons, and all things in nature, yet disdains to rein in human actions:

> Whoever you are who bind the world's concord.
> We are no poor part of this vast world,
> We mortals, storm-tossed on Fortune's salt ocean.[16]

As with any good therapist, Philosophy listens to Boethius's rambling and at times disjoined outburst with care, but she maintains a "serene expression."[17] Indeed, she refuses to recognize that he has suffered any harm at all. She asks him a series of questions to gauge his mental state, the most important of which is whether the world is governed by chance or reason. On that question, Boethius is unshakable: God presides over his creation.[18] Yet Boethius shows himself to be an exile from that creation and, hence, an exile from his own true nature. When she asks him to define a human being, he answers that he is a "rational and mortal animal," and nothing more. "You have ceased to know who you yourself are," she tells him.[19] He is like the prodigal son who has wandered far and must find his way home. His lost library is unimportant, she tells him; what is important is "that which makes books worth their price," the knowledge and wisdom contained within them.[20]

She recognizes that the prisoner is not yet ready for the most powerful medicines. Depression, anger, and sorrow pull him in too many directions. She proposes instead what will prove a multistage cure, beginning with some commonsense wisdom, progressing through a logical and metaphysical analysis of the good, and ending with an explication of providence and man's place in the divine plan.

It is an ambitious agenda. Whether Philosophy can deliver on all of her promises remains to be seen.

## BOOK TWO: FINDING "STRENGTH IN WHAT REMAINS BEHIND"[21]

Philosophy begins her cure by calling to her aid "the persuasive power of the sweetness of rhetoric."[22] In starting this way, Philosophy recognizes that what we call things, how we characterize and present them, makes a great deal of difference in how we feel about them and even how we understand them. Rhetoric, like poetry, can serve good

as well as ill. Philosophy will not employ rhetoric or poetry indiscriminately, but only to set Boethius on “the straight path” and move him forward in the right direction.[23] Plato, of course, had railed against rhetoric (and the Sophists who taught it) as antithetical to philosophical inquiry. Yet Plato himself was the greatest master of rhetoric, and, though he also dismissed poetry as full of falsehood and banished most forms of it from his ideal republic, he himself employed powerful poetic images throughout his work to take his readers where dialectic alone could not.

Boethius the author makes Philosophy forthrightly acknowledge her need for rhetoric “and along with her let this musical handmaiden from our own house sing in accompaniment, now the more lilting measures, now the more solemn ones.”[24] Philosophy, in other words, is acknowledging that rhetoric and poetry (both serious and light verse!) are each essential tools in the search for wisdom. This is quite astonishing and very modern, a view more typically associated with Nietzsche than with the Middle Ages. And it raises implicitly the same question that Nietzsche would pose more directly: how do you know that rhetoric and poetry are in fact proceeding on “the straight path,” rather than chasing an illusion?

In keeping with this introduction, the first three points that Philosophy makes are rhetorical ones, designed to change Boethius's patterns of thought and return him to a broader perspective on his life. First, she stresses that Fortune (also personified as a woman) can never be relied upon. It is her nature to change and bestow her favors haphazardly, first on one, then on another. Even at her most tender, she is but a harbinger of coming catastrophe. Fortune's possessions do not belong to us; they are simply on loan, and we have no cause to complain when their return is demanded. Indeed, Philosophy stresses (in a preview of deeper points to come), any goods that were truly your own could not be taken from you. But, as the prisoner has freely chosen Fortune to be his mistress, “it is only reasonable that you endure with detachment whatever happens within Fortune's playground.”[25] Fortune's wheel ever spins. If you eagerly climb up with it, you can hardly cry injustice when it casts you back down.

Boethius's response to this discourse and the accompanying poem is: that's all very pretty, but any delight lasts only as long as I am listening to the poem. Philosophy moves on to her second point, which is that Boethius really has nothing to complain about, because he has in fact been extraordinarily lucky. When your own father died, she reminds him, you were adopted by and later married into an illustrious family. You held high offices in your youth. Your wife was loving and modest. Riches were at your disposal. But that is not all.

> If there is any enjoyment to be derived from mortal things, one that bears any stamp of true bliss, could the memory of that one shining moment ever be annihilated by any juggernaut of invading evils, when you saw your two sons, each of them now a consul, set forth from your home accompanied by a throng of senators, and by the enthusiasm of the common people?[26]

Weighing in a scale the joys and the sorrows of your life, she insists, "you could not deny that you were happy up until now."[27]

Boethius protests rather feebly that it is precisely because he was once so happy that his present condition is so miserable. But Philosophy will have none of that. His most valuable possessions are intact. His father-in-law, Symmachus, to whom he owes so much, thrives, undisturbed. (The reader knows that, in fact, Symmachus will be arrested and executed shortly after the death of Boethius. But neither Boethius the author nor Boethius the prisoner knows that.) His wife loves and longs for him. Most important of all, his sons are unharmed and carry his name and his talents. These anchors support him and are dearer than life itself. You would know "how happy you are," she tells him, "if you would only recognize the goods that you have!"[28]

Boethius cannot dispute these sources of support. But he still contends that happiness is impossible in his condition. Philosophy now presses her third and most important point, which is that Boethius is plagued not by things themselves but by "false opinions about things."[29] Boethius places a false valuation on the so-called goods of fortune—wealth, rank, power, and reputation—that those things do not warrant and will not bear. Philosophy proceeds to attack each in turn—not to show that they are worthless, but rather that they are "fretful thing[s]" and "by their nature…are neither completely beneficent nor perpetually present."[30] On closer analysis, the things fortune has taken from Boethius were not worth pursuing then and are not worth mourning now.

Philosophy begins with a broader point, which is that no man, however blessed by fortune he seems to be, is completely content. One man is rich but lonely. Another is happily married but childless. A third has children but weeps for their misfortune. No one is in perfect harmony with his condition, "for in every single Fortune there is something present that the outsider has no knowledge of, but that the insider shrinks from in horror."[31] Even those who are extravagantly fortunate are rocked by the slightest setbacks because their sensibilities have become too refined and have lost their resilience.

The fundamental problem is that we look outside ourselves for the sources of our own happiness rather than within. The so-called goods of fortune will not bring happiness, not just because they are

transitory, but also because they have no intrinsic worth. Wealth is a form of impoverishment. As one man hoards it, others are deprived. Yet the one who has it fears to lose it and never thinks he has enough. We seek, by means of abundance, to rout our feeling of need and thereby only increase it: “those who own very many things need very many things; conversely, those who measure their abundance not by the superfluity of their greed but by the necessity of their nature need only a very little.”[32] Who, then, is the richer?

So, too, with rank and power, which have nothing to do with innate virtue. Indeed, they too often attach themselves to the most despicable people. We turn ourselves into the slaves of others seeking preferment and the illusion of power. We would laugh at a mouse lording it over a nest of mice. Yet even the best minds long for glory and reputation, both of which are circumscribed by geography and time. How many famous men are unknown outside their narrow sphere and quickly forgotten after their deaths, if not before? The whole Earth, moreover, is but a pinpoint in the vastness of the heavenly sphere, and our lives are but fleeting moments in the eternity of time. We sacrifice conscience and virtue and demand as rewards “vulgar favors and empty gossip.”[33]

Philosophy closes this phase in the dialogue with the seemingly paradoxical assertion that adverse fortune is actually better for us than good fortune. For one thing, adverse fortune reveals our true friends, those who will stand by us when we have no external benefits to offer them. “Go on,” she tells Boethius, “complain about the wealth and resources that you've lost; you have found what is the most valuable kind of riches, your friends.”[34] And, whereas good fortune focuses our attention on externals and gives us a false sense of what is important, adverse fortune steels our character and drives us back upon our own resources:

> On humble rock, remember,
> Build your home in complete trust.[35]

A happiness born of and dependent upon fortune is not true happiness and will not last. We must find happiness within: “if you have mastery over yourself, you will possess a thing that you yourself would never want to lose and that Fortune could not ever take away from you.”[36]

## BOOK THREE: THE ONE AND THE MANY

Up to now, the discussion has been “philosophical” only in the sense that one might say, “My philosophy is to keep my chin up and take one day at a time.” This is not to denigrate the first two books. They are full of hard-earned wisdom. But the points are mainly rhetorical ones, driven by everyday moralizing, not by intricate arguments. Philosophy has presented Boethius with commonsense admonitions, in a mixture of poetry and prose, designed to reconcile him to his suffering. In that, she has by and large succeeded, particularly in the poems. At the beginning of book 3, Boethius praises the consolation he has received from “the gravity of your conclusions and even more by the delightfulness of your singing! Yes, so much so that even now I would not think myself to be less than a match for the blows of Fortune from this point on.”[37]

Yet Philosophy has promised Boethius more. She has promised to transform his understanding in a way that will bring not just consolation but joy, not just a reconciliation with but a triumph over fate. She has promised to draw Boethius out of Plato's cave and into the divine sunlight of true knowledge. It is to that more ambitious task that she now turns.

She begins, as philosophers are wont to do, by defining her terms. She has already warned Boethius of the tendency of all mortals to “happily conjure up under false names things that have quite a different nature, names that are readily contradicted by the effects of the things themselves.”[38] Our words correspond to false images of things that bear no relation to reality. We speak of riches that only bring poverty; of power that is powerless; of honor without merit. Philosophy's point, as Eileen Sweeney explains, is that “language should follow the reality of things in which dishonorable results cannot come from what is truly honorable, nor want from what is truly riches, nor lack of control from true power.”[39]

It might seem that Philosophy wants to conjure away unmerited suffering with a definitional sleight of hand. But her point is more substantive than that. She starts, following Aristotle, with the premise that all men desire happiness. That is the ultimate goal to which all other goods are subordinate. We seek riches, political honors, power, glory, or pleasure individually or in combination, not as ends in themselves, but because we think they will bring happiness. Happiness is the highest good. Yet, if we misapprehend the nature of these intermediate goods, happiness will not result. We will be chasing an illusion of happiness, not the real thing. And that is precisely the problem we face. We discern the true goal of happiness, and our natural striving leads us toward this highest good, yet “uncountably diverse miscalculations drag [us] away from it.”[40]

Philosophy's critical point is that the highest good, which is

happiness, must be complete unto itself. If it needed anything else, there would be a higher good that contained that other thing. We seek such completeness when we long for riches, positions of honor, power, reputation, and even pleasure. Philosophy does not deny that these "goods" can bring felicity (*felicitas*). But she does deny that they are complete unto themselves; they therefore cannot bring happiness (*beatitudo*).[41]

She reminds Boethius that even when he enjoyed the most felicity, his mind was never free from being fretted by something he lacked or something he feared losing.[42] She then reprises some of her earlier points about illusory goods. Wealth appears to promise self-sufficiency, but it is accompanied by its own set of wants and concerns. High office does not make a man honorable or even preeminent, but is more likely to foster wickedness and bring disgrace. Power invites challenges to power and constant anxiety:

> If you cannot dispel dark foreboding,
> Nor rout all your desolate sorrow,
> Then yours is not power, not ever.[43]

Glory is but idle gossip and, if not based on sound judgment, is both fleeting and unworthy of notice. Physical pleasure may delight momentarily, but it is preceded by craving and followed closely by remorse. "Go ahead, mortals, reckon the goods of the body as highly as you like, so long as you realize that this little something that you admire can be done away with by the paltry flame of a three-day fever."[44] None of these so-called goods can deliver the complete happiness they appear to promise; thus, none can constitute the highest good.

The fundamental problem, Philosophy explains, is that we try to divide what is indivisible. The highest good, which is happiness, is indeed self-sufficient, worthy of esteem, powerful, renowned, and a source of delight. The highest good lacks for nothing. But the highest good is one, not many, and by focusing on these different characteristics or attributes of the highest good, we separate them out, as if they were ends in themselves, and thereby mistake their nature and the nature of the good. When we strive to secure a part of a thing that has no parts, we acquire neither the part nor the whole. "What is simple and indivisible in its own nature, human miscalculation divides and drags away from the true and the perfect to the false and the imperfect."[45] We chase illusory goods and thereby miss that for which we truly long.

This unification of numerous apparent goods in a single, highest good allows Philosophy to bridge the gap between the instrumental

and the moral. The goods we have been discussing—self-sufficiency, esteem, power, renown, delight—appear to be morally neutral. That is why they seem to be gifts of fortune rather than of character. But Philosophy is contending that, in their essence, they are not morally neutral. They are all aspects of the highest good, which, she will now argue, is one with the God of the philosophers.

Philosophy shifts gears from argument to poetry at this point. Using imagery from Plato's *Timaeus*, she invokes divine assistance in her search for the highest good. Poem 9 of book 3 is the centerpiece of the *Consolation*. It is the pivot around which the argument moves to an entirely new level. In it, Philosophy speaks of the "center Soul" that rests unmoved and yet sets all things in motion. This immortal world soul, which shapes changing physical phenomena through reason alone, is the "unstinting essence of true good." All lesser things revolve around it and long to return to it.

> Grant to the mind, Father, that it may rise to your holy foundations;
> Grant it may ring round the source of the Good, may discover the true light,
> And fix the soul's vision firmly on you, vision keen and clear-sighted.
> Scatter these shadows, dissolve the dead weight of this earthly concretion,
> Shine in the splendor that is yours alone: only you are the bright sky,
> You are the serenity, peace for the holy; their goal is to see you;
> You are their source, their conveyance, their leader, their path, and their haven.[46]

It is a beautiful poem, both an invocation and a vision of the highest good. Philosophy will try to provide a justification of that vision in what follows.

She does so in a series of arguments that became standard fare for philosophers and theologians until Immanuel Kant exposed their fallacies in the eighteenth century.[47] Interestingly, though, Philosophy employs these arguments not so much to prove the existence of God—which she takes for granted—but rather to demonstrate that God embodies the highest good. First, she argues that we judge imperfection by comparison with perfection. So the existence of anything imperfect in a class of objects means there necessarily must be something perfect in it as well. "Therefore if, as we have shown just a little while ago, there does exist some imperfect happiness in some fragile good, it cannot be doubted that there also exists a

steadfast and perfect good."[48] In a related argument, Philosophy contends that if the highest good were not in God, there would be something more excellent than and prior to God. But such priority is both contrary to our concept of God and would lead to an infinite regress in search of the ultimate and perfect good, which is the necessary source of all things.

Neither argument seems particularly compelling from our perspective. As Kant showed, existence is not a predicate—that is, we make no addition to a concept (such as God or perfect goodness) when we add that it exists or does not exist. Put another way, there is no contradiction in denying the existence of a perfect being; nor does it render incoherent our discussion of imperfections. As for the infinite-regress argument, since we have no direct experience of any ultimate and perfect good, we have no justification for concluding that the contingent series of worldly events had its origins in something that is absolutely necessary.

Despite these flaws, the basic point Philosophy is making is an attractive one. We seek perfect happiness as the highest good. That highest good, if it exists, is by its nature divine and properly equated with our concept of God as the source of all things. There cannot be two highest things that differ from one another, Philosophy explains, because then one would be lacking something possessed by the other and hence would be imperfect. So the highest good is by nature one with and equivalent to God, in whom is found the highest happiness. Insofar as we participate in that highest good, moreover, we realize the divine in our own nature and become godlike and happy.

Everything that exists, Philosophy then argues, strives for this unity and hence for the good. Philosophy urges a teleological understanding of nature—that is, every animate thing strives to preserve its existence and thereby to realize its nature. Even inanimate objects seek their proper places in the scheme of things: heavy objects fall; flames rise. "That which is fitting for each and every thing is what preserves it, just as the things that are opposed to it annihilate it."[49] Since all things seek to avoid dissolution, they seek the one, which is also the good. Therefore, the good is the goal of all things. Conversely, it is the good that holds all things together. "This world could hardly have come together into a single form out of components so different and so opposed to each other if there were not one who could join together such different things."[50] This is an argument from design (and it gave Kant serious pause). There must have been an architect to arrange the world, and that architect arranged all things according to the good. Thus, all things strive for the good in order to realize their proper natures within the divine plan.

It is a coherent if slightly fuzzy vision, aided more by poetry than

by sound reasoning. Philosophy invokes Plato's theory of recollection in its support, noting that the truth is buried deep within us and recollected only dimly:

> There clings within the seed of truth—make no mistake—
> Aroused and fanned by proper teaching into flame.[51]

Philosophy then tries to argue that evil has no place in this divine plan. There is nothing God cannot do, yet God cannot do evil; therefore, Philosophy concludes, evil is nothing. But Boethius, to his credit, dismisses this verbal sleight of hand. He accuses Philosophy of constructing with her arguments a labyrinth with no apparent exit. She answers not with another argument but with a beautiful poem, retelling the story of Orpheus, the musician, who entered the underworld in search of his beloved wife, Eurydice, and so charmed the gods below that she was allowed to follow him on condition that he not look back.

> Who can give to such love a law?
> Love is law to itself alone.
> Woe is him! At the edge of night
> Orpheus saw his Eurydice,
> Saw and lost her and died himself.
> Mortal men! This tale points at you,
> You who seek to conduct your minds
> To the light of the day above:
> Let no man give a backward glance
> In defeat, to the caves of Hell—
> What he takes with himself as his
> He will lose when he sees the dead.[52]

Philosophy is trying to lead Boethius out of the cave and into the light of eternal truth. He must not look back. He must not retain his old modes of thought or cling to the false values that have imprisoned his soul and led to a kind of death-in-life. He must even let go of, and move beyond, rational argument.

## BOOK FOUR: PROVIDENCE AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

Boethius is enchanted by the poem and happy to admit that

Philosophy is leading him toward the true light. But he still insists on looking back, for he cannot understand why the evil that tracks him exists and is allowed to flourish if God is all-knowing, is all-powerful, and fashions all things according to the good. One might say that Boethius has to look back until evil itself dissolves before his gaze and disappears forever into the shadows.

Philosophy accordingly offers Boethius a different, more Augustinian perspective on the problem of evil. She no longer claims that evil is nothing, but only that good is always more powerful than evil. Power is the ability to accomplish what we desire. All people, both good and evil, seek happiness, which has been shown to be the highest good. Those who are good achieve the good and are therefore powerful. Those who are evil do not achieve the good and are therefore powerless; they have only the illusion of power, which is dissipated on illusory goods. For the same reason, the good achieve happiness, whereas the evil are desolate. Each person gets what he or she deserves. The good man suffers no harm, for "no matter how brutal evil people may be, the crown shall never fall from the head of the wise man and shall never wither; nor shall another person's unrighteousness pluck from the souls of the righteous the distinctions that are theirs alone."[53] Evil people, by contrast, "are never free from the punishments of their own unrighteousness."[54] They are like beasts; they have lost not only the good they purport to seek but their humanity as well.[55] God does not have to intervene to punish evil. Wickedness itself debars men from true happiness and union with the good. Indeed, Philosophy insists, the evil are worse off when they are allowed to continue in their course unimpeded, whereas, when they are brought to justice, some good is added to them and they are made better.

Boethius, however, is still looking back, this time at the commonsense judgments of men, to whom, he insists, Philosophy's argument would seem not only incredible but not even worthy of a hearing.[56] Boethius finds merit in that popular judgment that the good often suffer harm unjustly while the evil go unpunished. He notes that "there is not a single wise man who would prefer to be an exile, to have no resources and no good name rather than to remain unchanged in his own city and to thrive as one predominant in his wealth and resources, preeminent in his political honor, and strong in his power."[57] Those who are good, he insists, can suffer harm in their lives, and that harm is real, not illusory.

In response, Philosophy does not simply repeat her arguments about the highest good, which equals happiness and is, by a divine sleight of hand, reserved for those who are good. She notes that the issue he has raised is the greatest and most difficult of all; almost no

answer will suffice, and doubts, like the Hydra's heads, grow faster than they can be lopped off.[58] Suitably, therefore, and with an enigmatic smile, Philosophy launches into the longest and most important prose passage in the *Consolation*.[59] In it, she attempts to demonstrate that everything that happens is a result of divine providence and therefore is for the best, even if we cannot, from our limited human perspective, fully understand the workings of that providence.

In the end, though, what Philosophy asks of Boethius is not understanding but faith, a faith that the cosmos is ordered by a divine hand. That premise, which Boethius had accepted at the outset, is bolstered by the arguments, previously noted, that God is the most perfect being, the first cause, and the divine architect. Using Aristotelian terminology, Philosophy explains that the divine mind set all things in motion and, as such, is the efficient cause of all things. The unfolding of events is a direct product of this divine intelligence and thus proceeds according to a divine plan. Providence is the name Philosophy gives to this plan; fate is the unfolding of that plan through time: "the order of fated events proceeds from the simplicity of Providence."[60]

Once this premise is accepted, along with the equation of God with the highest good, it necessarily follows that all events are directed toward the good, however confused and dislocated they may seem from our limited perspective. In the book of Job, when Job asks why good men suffer, God thunders back: "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth?" "Will you condemn me that you may be justified?"[61] Philosophy's answer is essentially the same. We cannot understand events from the perspective of the divine architect, so we must simply accept that they happen "in accordance with what is right and what is the divine arrangement, and for the good of those to whom they are seen to befall."[62] It must be so, given the existence and nature of the divinity as the first cause and the highest good. Every fortune, whether delightful or calamitous, is therefore good.[63] When we are buffeted by fate, we must accept it as either a just punishment or a correction designed to improve us.[64]

> Forward, strong men all, where this great example,
> Where this high road leads! Shoulder now your burden,
> Now without delay, for the earth, once conquered,
> Gives you the fixed stars.[65]

## BOOK FIVE: FREE WILL AND DIVINE

## FOREKNOWLEDGE

Boethius, not Philosophy, begins driving the discussion in book 5. She wants to move in a new direction and cover "other things,"[66] but Boethius insists that she address concerns of his own instead. Although they are "a little off to one side of the path of what [she] had proposed," Philosophy acquiesces.[67] We never discover what "other things" Philosophy would have treated, but the strong indication is that the discussion ends up in the very place she intended all along.

The question Boethius now poses is about the role of chance in human affairs. Given that God initiates the chain of causation according to which the divine plan unfolds, is there "such a thing as chance at all?"[68] Philosophy's answer is "it depends." If you define chance as "a product of random motion, without any interweaving of causes," then chance does not exist, because all events have causes.[69] "Nothing comes from nothing."[70] But "chance" does have a legitimate meaning when applied to intention. A man may do something for a particular purpose, such as plow a field to plant grain, and discover buried gold. The fact that, unbeknownst to him, gold was buried in that field of course has its own causes, just as does his plowing the field. But "it is the unforeseen and unexpected confluence of these causes that seems to have engineered a chance occurrence."[71] The import of the example is not lost on an attentive reader: Boethius will plow a field of his own choosing for his own reasons and, in the process, find the gold promised him by Philosophy.

Philosophy has now presented Boethius with a hierarchy in how events should be perceived: Providence is the divine plan conceived in the mind of God. Fate is the unfolding of that plan over time. Fortune is our imaginative reconstruction of our experience of fate. And chance is what seems to us "an unexpected outcome, deriving from confluent causes."[72] There is a corresponding hierarchy, from the bottom up, in our knowledge and understanding of these events: our senses experience and respond to events as pure chance; imagination weaves events into fortune; reason grasps the fate behind fortune; and divine insight, in which we can only dimly share, provides us with the simple vision of providence, which is the highest good and both the efficient and final cause of all things.[73] As our level of understanding increases, chance and fortune disappear into the fate decreed by providence.

But where in this hierarchy, Boethius asks, is there any room for free will? Moreover, if everything is predetermined, "that one and

only avenue of exchange between human beings and God will be taken away, the avenue of hope and prayer for deliverance; provided, of course, that for the price of our rightful humility we deserve the return of divine grace, which is beyond price."[74] This is a much more explicitly theological question than those Boethius has asked so far. Humble prayer and divine grace are not concepts regularly found in pagan philosophy. But Boethius complains that they are precluded if everything is predetermined by providence.

The freedom of the will (and hence the responsibility of humans for their actions and the justness of their rewards and punishments) is the final question that Philosophy tackles, even while acknowledging the inadequacy of human reason to attain a full understanding of this issue. She contends that inherent in rationality is the freedom of independent judgment. We are free to want or not to want certain things and hence to choose or not to choose those things. Such choices stand outside the interweaving of causes. She insists, however, that our freedom is greatest when we follow the path of the good set down for us by the divine mind. Those who give way to vice, by contrast, "are caught in the whirlwind of destructive passions" and thereby, "in a certain sense,…are the captives of their own liberty."[75] This is an idea Kant will develop more than a thousand years later, when he claims we are free only when our will accords with the moral law binding on all rational beings.[76] But the argument of Philosophy here is more nuanced and Aristotelian; we are freest and most godlike when we realize our highest nature in the exercise of divine reason.

Philosophy goes on to claim that, because we are free to choose, providence, which sees all things in advance, is justified in holding us responsible for our choices; "it assigns to their merits each and every thing that has been predestined for them."[77] But this divine prescience raises a still more difficult doubt in Boethius's mind. How can God's foreknowledge of all things be consistent with the freedom of independent judgment? "For if God sees all things in advance and cannot be mistaken in any way, that thing must necessarily happen that Providence foresees will happen."[78] Freedom of choice is therefore an illusion because we will necessarily choose as we do. It is not enough, Boethius insists, to claim that foreknowledge does not *cause* the event in question but only anticipates it. If God foresees all and cannot be wrong, then the actions he foresees will *necessarily* occur. They are, in no sense, contingent on individual choice, and "rewards and punishments are set before good and evil people in vain."[79]

Philosophy's answer to this problem depends on the hierarchy of knowledge that she has already set forth. "The motion of human rational argument," she explains, "cannot set itself next to the

simplicity of divine foreknowledge."[80] God does not exist in time, and his knowledge is not dependent on time. God does not gaze into the future and anticipate human events. God is eternal and sees all in a simple, atemporal vision that simultaneously encompasses all temporal events as if they were present. "His knowledge…has passed beyond all the motion of time and is stable in the simplicity of its own present; it embraces the infinite reaches of what has passed and what is to come and, in its own simple perception, it looks at all things as if they are being carried out *now*."[81] If you see me take a step, then I necessarily am taking a step; otherwise, you would not see me do it. But the fact that you see it simultaneously with its occurrence does not change the fact that I take the step voluntarily. So, too, God's prescience, which sees all events as present, knows but does not determine all events in time.[82]

From this argument, Philosophy contends that mortals enjoy "an inviolate freedom of independent judgment."[83] It is therefore just for God to dispense rewards to good people and punishments to bad people. We must place our hopes and our prayers in God and strive for righteousness, Philosophy concludes in the terms Boethius has proposed, because we "act before the eyes of a judge who beholds all things."[84] Boethius, apparently satisfied at last, offers no further comment or question. His silence at the end of the *Consolation* is the silence of Job before the wonders of God; it is the silence of humble prayer.[85]

## THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY

Boethius scholars have debated endlessly over the ending of the *Consolation* and how it should be understood. Two prominent academics find it deliberately and provocatively unsatisfying. Joel Relihan suggests that "both the author, through his use of the word 'consolation,' and Philosophy, by means of promises made, which are never kept, involve the reader in a search for certain answers that do not explicitly come."[86] John Marenbon finds an "odd and large gap" in the argument, because "there is no indication of how the individual man, Boethius, is supposed to relate to true happiness."[87] Marenbon even contends—based on a single sentence in the penultimate paragraph[88]—that Philosophy contradicts the entire course of her argument by admitting that God himself is "the cause of the motions of the human mind as well as events in the world."[89] Since Philosophy has previously conceded that what is causally determined is not free,

it follows, Marenbon asserts, that we have no free will: “Philosophy's long and impressive defense of human freedom is ruined—but she seems not to have noticed.”[90]

Both Relihan and Marenbon have an ulterior motive in finding Philosophy's argument a failure, and that is to make way for Christianity. They note that Boethius the author was plainly a Christian. He wrote theological treatises on the Trinity, the incarnation of Christ, the nature of God, and the authority of scriptures. Yet in the *Consolation*, any mention of the word made flesh in Christ is conspicuously absent. Indeed, there are no references to Christ at all, nor to the resurrection, the sacraments, the Trinity, or the Christian heaven. The *Consolation* is, in the end, a deeply religious book, but it is not an explicitly Christian one. Its religion is closer to Plato's *Timaeus* and the book of Job than to the New Testament. Why, when faced with torture and death, did Boethius not seek consolation in the revealed religion that purported to offer him personal salvation?[91]

Relihan and Marenbon believe that he did, and they find their solution to the puzzle in the fact that the *Consolation* is structured as a Menippean satire. Menippus of Gadara was a Greek writer in the third century BCE. He wrote satires in what is somewhat archly called a prosimetrical form, which is to say that he interspersed prose passages with poems. The *satura Menippea*, as the form became known, was adopted by subsequent writers and always contained a heavy dose of irony or *spoudogeloion* (“jesting in earnest”).[92] Whatever was presented was in turn deliberately undermined. Relihan and Marenbon contend that Boethius adopted the Menippean form in order to signal to the reader the inherent limitations of pagan thought and thereby to make clear that only Christianity can provide the final consolation Boethius seeks.[93] Relihan in particular insists that the *Consolation* is “an ironic text” and that “most modern readers have simply missed the joke.”[94]

This Christianized reading finds little support in the text, as even Relihan acknowledges.[95] Moreover, neither Relihan nor Marenbon grapples with the fact that if Philosophy's argument is indeed a failure—because the recognition of divine providence would preclude free will—then Christianity collapses as well. In any event, their reading is highly implausible. Boethius had lost everything: home, possessions, honor, and access to family. He was cast into prison and facing the almost-certain prospect of execution. There is no reason to think he would seek his consolation in such a roundabout, hidden, and unsatisfying manner. He had no reason to hide his beliefs. As another scholar, Danuta Shanzer, sensibly notes, “If Boethius had wanted to

suggest that faith in a Christian divinity and theology was man's only ultimate recourse, he could and would have signaled that fact clearly."[96] Boethius was not James Joyce, deliberately embedding in his work playful puzzles to mystify future generations of scholars. He was not constructing an elaborate joke.

Nor does the prosimetrical form of the work or the supposed failures of Philosophy to offer adequate consolation provide a sufficient basis for such a counterintuitive reading. Writers constantly adapt existing forms to new purposes. Boethius in this instance adopted Menippean satire to help the prisoner change his perspective on evil and on his own impending death.[97] The poems and their music are an integral part of that purpose and of the consolation offered by Philosophy.[98] Philosophy does not represent philosophical reasoning narrowly construed. She represents the love of wisdom (which is what *philo-sophia* literally means) and, hence, as the letters on her clothing indicate, the entire ladder of human understanding, from the practical to the theoretical, as embodied in the poetry and prose of Boethius's predecessors. Plato did something very similar in the *Symposium*, in which the early speeches on love represent various stages of Greek culture (epic poetry, law, science, tragedy, and comedy), all of which are important but none of which can attain full wisdom without the aid and guidance of Philosophy.[99]

In the *Consolation*, Philosophy has not failed in that task. She has not fallen short of the promises she made to the prisoner in book 1, when she gave him the philosophical equivalent of the Apgar, "to take the pulse of your mental state," and found his score alarmingly low.[100] She asked him four questions: Is the world ruled by chance or reason? By what mechanism is it governed? What is the end toward which all things strive? What is a human being? After first resuscitating him by gentle measures, Philosophy went on to answer all those questions during the course of the discussion, starting from the premise—which the prisoner himself said was unshakable—that "God the creator presides over his own creation."[101] In the course of the discussion, she led the prisoner to conclude that the world is not governed by chance but by divine providence, which orders all things to strive for the highest good, in harmony with God, who is the source of all true happiness. A human being is endowed by God with that same striving and yet is given the freedom to move toward or away from the good by his or her own choice.

This is a consolation, not a logical proof. Like Augustine, Boethius recognized the limitations of language and the importance of intuition before the ineffable. Accordingly, he has Philosophy frankly admit that reason can take us only so far toward the truth.[102] Human discourse unfolds in time and therefore cannot capture divine

intelligence.[103] But poetry conveys insights that can take us beyond prose, insights of which, following Plato, we already possess faint echoes. Our human understanding can reach out toward the divine even if we cannot fully grasp it.

Philosophy has accordingly woven prose (reason) and poetry (insight) together to form a vision of divine providence that strikes a chord deep within the prisoner, even as it seems out of harmony with his current circumstances. Despite the prisoner's occasional sense that he is trapped in a labyrinth devised by Philosophy, he ultimately recognizes, when he drives the discussion in book 5, that it will be his own choice whether or not to accept that vision. “Raise up your minds to blameless hopes,” Philosophy urges, for “you act before the eyes of a judge who beholds all things.”[104] There is cosmic justice, she tells him, even if he cannot, in his current state, perceive its unfolding.

But, to repeat an earlier question, how is the prisoner to know that he is in fact proceeding on “the straight path” rather than chasing an illusion? Some of Philosophy's arguments he has found compelling. Many of her poems he has found deeply moving. He feels deep within himself flickers of the divine fire. He is confident that, somehow, the practice of virtue is not in vain. But, in the end, he cannot know, at least not until he takes the final cure. If the *satura Menippea* means anything, it is surely that: for all our knowledge, we cannot really know. Yet that in itself is an insight of Philosophy.

Philosophy's most important promise to the prisoner is: “I will equip your mind with wings, so that it can raise itself on high, so that you can cast your confusion into exile and return recuperated to your fatherland, following my lead, along my path, by my conveyance.”[105] Philosophy, of course, is not proposing a Daedalus-like return to Rome. The fatherland is a reunion with God in death. Life itself is a form of exile from our highest natures. But Philosophy promises to give flight to the prisoner's mind so that he can participate, however fleetingly, in a divine perspective on the world below—a perspective from which the concerns and actions of earthly tyrants seem petty indeed—and thereby prepare himself for this reunion. Philosophy underscores this point when she repeatedly tells the prisoner that she will administer gentler medicines until he is ready for a stronger and more caustic cure. Relihan is surely correct that this “bitter cup” is a reference to the hemlock taken by Socrates at the end of the *Phaedo*.[106] Socrates there argues that philosophy is a preparation for death, which cures all earthy ills.[107] Here, too, only death will reveal whether the prisoner's “blameless hopes” are realized.

Relihan repeatedly stresses that the prisoner does not (like Socrates in the *Phaedo*) die at the end of the book and thus is not “saved” by Philosophy, which Relihan takes to mean that he will have

to find his salvation elsewhere.[108] But, even aside from the difficulties of a first-person narrator describing his own death, Philosophy nowhere tells the prisoner to seek salvation in suicide. Boethius's death will come soon enough at the hands of the state, just as Socrates's did. What Philosophy is preparing Boethius to do is to face the inevitable with equanimity and even hope. At the end of the day, Philosophy is even willing to grant Boethius the terms on which he wants to view those hopes: the efficacy of humble prayer, the possibility of grace, and the necessity for righteousness.

Knowing that he would soon die did indeed concentrate Boethius's mind wonderfully. Nothing he says is inconsistent with the teachings of Christianity, and for all we know he remained a devout Christian to the end. But, in his darkest hour, he found no need to call in scriptural authority as a *deus ex machina* to resolve the insoluble dilemmas of Philosophy. He kept his faith in human nature and human wisdom as the securest means to bring him to an understanding of divine providence and what stance he should take before it. For Boethius, revelation without reason to support it is just an empty form of words.

Relihan complains that the prisoner never achieves a beatific vision similar to that of Augustine and Monica in the *Confessions*.[109] But the absence of any such vision is a mark of Boethius's courage, not his failure. The end of the *Consolation* is a triumph of hope where knowledge falls short. Even if those hopes prove unfounded—and we, of course, like Boethius, cannot know—the book as a whole is a triumph of the human spirit over adversity. Boethius transforms his perspective on his own suffering by marshaling what he could work out in company of the greatest minds, both poets and philosophers, who preceded him.

Boethius, moreover, sees by the letter *theta* on her clothing that Philosophy herself is marked for death just as he is. The classical, humanist tradition will be submerged for centuries in a sea of theological scholasticism. This threat to humanism may be another reason for Boethius's deathbed resistance to relying on explicitly Christian doctrines. Even Plato's Academy in Athens, the most sacred ground of philosophy, would soon be shuttered by Justinian, who found its spirit of open inquiry anathema to Christian faith. Most consolations are written “to” a particular person. The title of this one, *The Consolation* of *Philosophy*, is deliberately ambiguous, for Boethius provides consolation to Philosophy just as Philosophy provides consolation to Boethius.

The consolation provided to Philosophy is the book itself. As British philosopher Henry Chadwick explains, “this last Roman, whose gaze is so profoundly retrospective, transmitted a whole cultural world to his medieval successors.”[110] The book was read widely

throughout the Middle Ages and translated into the vernacular of many languages, including into English by King Alfred and later by Chaucer. Thomas Aquinas wrestled with many of the problems raised by Boethius. Dante's *Commedia* was heavily influenced by Boethius's account of the ascent of the soul from the darkness of worldly cares to divine illumination, and Dante places Boethius amidst the saints in paradise.[111] Whether in fact he sits there for all eternity, or even aspired to do so, we cannot say. But he certainly sits among the great writers of the Western tradition whom he sought so fervently to celebrate and preserve in his final hours on Earth.

# Chapter 4

# *Beowulf* and the Heroic Ideal

Scholars still puzzle over *The Consolation of Philosophy* because of what it does not contain, which is any overtly Christian element. Scholars puzzle over *Beowulf* for the opposite reason: although the poem portrays a wholly pagan culture, still untouched by Christianity, it seems to contain a number of Christian elements. Some speculate that it was written down in its current form by a monk, based on an earlier oral tradition, and they see in its pages numerous Christian allegories. Some even go so far as to draw implausible parallels between Beowulf, the pagan warrior hero who slays monsters, and Christ, the lamb of peace who died on the cross.

Others mine the poem for historical and cultural information about the Germanic tribes that lived in what are now Sweden and Denmark during the sixth century, when the events of the poem can be plausibly dated. Written evidence about these tribes is sparse—at least after Tacitus's *Germania*, circa 98 CE—and the archeological record, though improving constantly, offers tantalizing details but not a full picture. Scholars accordingly fill in "historical" details from *Beowulf*, after the fashion of M. I. Finley, who created a "historical" portrait of the heroic age of Greece, circa 1125 BCE, drawn from the *Odyssey*.[1] Like *Beowulf*, the *Odyssey* was based on oral traditions and was written down in the form we have it some three hundred years after the events it describes. But it is a hazardous enterprise in either case to separate anachronisms from historically accurate details or even to assume that the poet was focused on historical accuracy rather

than on creating an internally coherent work of art.

J. R. R. Tolkien, who was the preeminent scholar of Anglo-Saxon literature in his day, as well as the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* (books deeply influenced by *Beowulf*), gave a famous 1936 address in which he rightly decried the fact that "*Beowulf* has been used as a quarry of fact and fancy far more assiduously than it has been studied as a work of art."[2] A similar and equally compelling remark about Homer was made by the art historian Bernard Berenson: "All my life I have been reading about Homer, philological, historical, archaeological, geographical, etc. Now I want to read him as pure art only, as commensurate with the heart and mind while humanity retains both."[3]

Here is what we do know about *Beowulf*. It was written in England, in "Old English"—that is, the Anglo-Saxon language—around the year 800, give or take two centuries. The poem concerns the deeds of a *thane* (noble warrior) who was later king of the Geat people living in what is now southern Sweden. There is no independent historical confirmation that Beowulf himself existed. But the Geats, one of the Germanic tribes, certainly did exist, and the time period within the poem can be specified because there is independent historical evidence concerning other characters and events mentioned in the poem, particularly the death of Beowulf's uncle, Hygelac, in a war with the Franks in 521. The events of the poem accordingly are set between 515 and 570, first in Denmark and later in the land of the Geats.[4]

The poem was undoubtedly based on earlier oral stories and lays, passed down through generations. But it is clear (as with Homer's *Odyssey*) that a single author of great intelligence and skill put the poem together in its final form.

Britain was largely Christian at the time that *Beowulf* was composed. But pagan and Christian elements were not so sharply distinguished then as they would later become. The few biblical references in the poem, moreover, are all to the Old Testament. There is nothing about Christ, sin, or salvation, and the customs and ceremonies of the characters are uniformly pagan in nature. The poet, looking through his Christian lens at what was already a time of great antiquity, shows enormous sensitivity to and sympathy for the Germanic warrior culture about which he writes, a culture that exalted martial prowess, practical wisdom, loyalty, generosity, personal honor, and revenge.

It is an admiring portrait, but one tinged with melancholy and perhaps an element of relief on the author's part that he or, less likely, she lives in a more enlightened, Christian era. The poem draws repeated contrasts between good and evil, light and darkness, joy and

sorrow.[5] There is never one without the other, and the former are inevitably overwhelmed by the latter. Scholars frequently puzzle over "the peculiar spiritual atmosphere of the poem."[6] The poet and translator Seamus Heaney rightly claims that it "possesses a mythic potency."[7] Another scholar notes that it "conveys a sense of large reserves of understanding and wisdom."[8]

*Beowulf* is that most contradictory of genres, an elegiac epic along the lines of the *Aeneid*. In it, pagan heroism and Christian regret are conjoined.[9] Tolkien contended that "the real resemblance of the *Aeneid* and *Beowulf* lies in the constant presence of a sense of the many-storied antiquity, together with its natural accompaniment, stern and noble melancholy."[10] Or, as a later scholar explained: "Both poets project onto the distant past features of the society of their own day, consciously and deliberately, in order to provide a sense of continuity."[11] *Beowulf* looks at pagan Germania through Christian eyes.

In this sense, *Beowulf* anticipates the Renaissance. Although the mood and matter of the poem are radically different from anything produced in fifteenth-century Florence, the poet is attempting, as Augustine and Boethius had done three hundred years earlier, and as Petrarch would do some five hundred years later, to appreciate and learn from pagan antiquity without abandoning a Christian present. To attempt such a feat in 800 was not remarkable; it was in fact highly characteristic of the early Middle Ages to try to reconcile the classical with the Christian.[12] What is remarkable is that the *Beowulf* poet succeeded so brilliantly in combining pagan and Christian elements without sacrificing artistic coherence.

## THE ANGLO-SAXONS AND THEIR GERMANIC FOREBEARS

The Germanic tribes east of the Rhine and north of the Danube were a constant problem for the Roman Empire. With the collapse of the empire, paymasters disappeared and, consequently, so did the soldiers guarding the frontier, who were themselves often barbarians. Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, Lombards, and others migrated to western Europe and set up kingdoms of their own. Yet many of the structures and customs of the empire remained, and, at least through the time of Augustine and Boethius, everyday life changed only at the margins.

That was not the case in Britain. By 410, after the withdrawal of

Roman troops, there was a power vacuum in what had been the remotest outpost of the empire. The native Britons (descended from the Celts) were beset by raiding Picts, Scots, and Irish. What civilization and governmental structure existed under the Romans rapidly disintegrated. Around 440, Saxon pirates infiltrated the west coast. Groups of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes from the coastal regions of what are now Denmark and Germany began to migrate there in large numbers. By the end of the sixth century, an array of Germanic chieftains, or "kings," controlled the eastern third of Britain.[13] Their languages evolved into Anglo-Saxon, which is what we now call Old English. The Britons retreated to Wales and Cornwall or crossed the Channel to what would become Brittany.

Christianity had long before found a foothold in the "Celtic Mediterranean," consisting of Roman Gaul, Britain, and Ireland.[14] The foothold was tenuous, but the ground was fertile. In 440, Irish raiders arrived on the east coast of Britain and kidnapped, among others, a sixteen-year-old boy named Patricius. He later escaped and went home, where he was ordained, and then returned to Ireland as its most famous and effective missionary, known to history as Saint Patrick. Irish Christianity rapidly and solidly entrenched itself.

The spread of Christianity was slower and less dramatic in Anglo-Saxon Britain. In 596, Pope Gregory the Great sent a mission that had considerable success, especially with Æthelbert, the king of Kent, who was already married to a Christian, Frankish princess. Gregory wisely directed that pagan shrines were to be respected and reconsecrated rather than destroyed, and that pagan customs and traditions—carried over from Germania—were to be absorbed into Christian feast days rather than abolished. The Anglo-Saxons gradually converted to Christianity, which became widespread by 700. The Venerable Bede (672–735) wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in 731. Though he wrote in Latin and was inspired by Eusebius's much broader *Church History*, Bede celebrated the growth of Anglo-Saxon "England" and the formation of "the English people," both terms that he coined.

The development of the Anglo-Saxon language aided this process of unification. Æthelbert's *Laws* was the first Anglo-Saxon text. Others followed. Bede movingly recounts the life of Caedmon, an illiterate field hand working at the monastery at Whitby Abbey who had a remarkable gift for poetry. Caedmon turned the Bible stories into Anglo-Saxon heroic verse in the late seventh century.[15] Before that, Latin had been the exclusive language of Christian poetry and thought. After Caedmon, the vernacular grew more robust. Unfortunately, only nine lines of his work are still extant, from a song of creation known as "Caedmon's Hymn." But that song appears to

play a role in *Beowulf*, and certainly Caedmon's Anglo-Saxon religious verse was a critical inspiration for its secular adaptation.

Paradoxically, another force for the formation of England was provided by Danish Vikings. In 793, they attacked the monastery of Lindisfarne on an island off the coast of Northumbria. The Viking raids lasted some eighty years before King Alfred of Wessex (849–899) united the various Saxon kingdoms and battled the Vikings to a draw. King Alfred further promoted the Anglo-Saxon language by translating himself, or commissioning translations of, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* and works by Augustine of Hippo and Pope Gregory. Prior to King Alfred, the many monasteries along the coasts of Ireland and England had been the sole repositories of Latin learning. He sought to extend that learning and to build upon it a uniquely Anglo-Saxon culture. Small wonder that King Alfred was, for many, the embodiment of wisdom in a leader.[16]

We do not know how many Anglo-Saxon pagan epics were written in England. Only one remains. *Beowulf* was presumably based on oral traditions and earlier written lays. The sole surviving manuscript dates to around 1000, but the poem was, by common if not universal consensus, composed much earlier. The manuscript survived by chance in some monastery library until it ended up in the hands of a private collector who could not even read Old English and thus had little idea what he possessed. In 1731, the manuscript was damaged but not destroyed in a fire. Copied in 1786 by an Icelandic scholar, Grim Thorkelin, *Beowulf* was first published, paradoxically, in a Latin translation in 1815.

The author of *Beowulf*, though “English” and a Christian, chose to write about his Germanic ancestors living in northern Europe hundreds of years earlier. The first half of the work is set among the Danes; the second half among the Geats in southern Sweden. Both were warrior cultures ruled by kings. The warriors owed total allegiance to their king. He in turn showered them from his “gift-chair” with weapons, rings, and land in proportion to their service. Loyalty and martial valor were the prime requirements of a warrior; wisdom and generosity those of the king. Violence was never far away, and blood was demanded for blood. The marriage bond was extremely important, and prominent women often were married to chiefs of neighboring tribes in order to forge peaceful ties. Sometimes these “peace weavers” were successful; just as often, they were not, and old feuds shattered the temporary calm.

# THE HALL OF HEOROT

“Hwaet!”

The first word of *Beowulf* can be variously translated as “Listen!” or “Lo!” or even “Hey!” It calls the reader's attention to a story *in geardagum*, in days gone by. A nostalgic note is thus introduced at the outset, a peering back through the darkness of history to times now long past, to an age of kings who ruled with “courage and greatness” and to the “heroic campaigns” they undertook.[17] How very different this opening is from those of Homer or Virgil. Homer invokes the muse to sing of the rage of Achilles or of the cunning of Odysseus. Virgil consciously combines the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by singing of “arms and the man,”[18] the exiled Aeneas and his battle for a new homeland. Beowulf, the main character, is not even introduced for almost two hundred lines and goes unnamed for 343 lines.

The *Beowulf* poet will sing of the great deeds of his eponymous hero in due course. But, as the first lines indicate, he is most interested in painting a portrait of a past age. He does not invoke his muse. He is, quintessentially, a teller of stories to his fellow Anglo-Saxons about their common ancestors. One can all but envision the poet in a crowded medieval hall, full of light and warmth and good cheer, calling for attention and singing his song to a rapt audience.

The poet begins with *Scyld Scefing* (Shield Sheafson, in Heaney's translation), who mysteriously arrived on Danish shores as a child alone in a boat filled with treasure. He grew up to become the powerful king of the Danes, conqueror of many tribes. On his death, his warrior band laid Scyld out in another such boat, loaded with equally bountiful treasure, “and launched him alone out over the waves.”[19] He disappeared on the ocean's sway from which he first came, drifting with wind and tide. Some such person as Scyld undoubtedly existed, but he lives now only in legend. Beginning with Scyld allows the poet to envelop his story in a sense of mystery and even magic, and to underscore its antiquity. The beginning also points to the end of the poem, for Scyld's life comes full circle as Beowulf's will do. And the story of Scyld serves as an apt metaphor for the poem itself; it is a foundling that comes to us through the mists of history, bearing great treasures and receiving due honors in return, yet still shrouded in mystery.

As the main action of the poem begins, the current king of the Danes is Hrothgar, the great-grandson of Scyld, who ascended to the throne upon the death of his older brother, Heorogar. (Almost thirty characters in the poem have names that begin with “H,” including Hrothgar, Heorogar, Halga, Hrothulf, and Hygelac, to name just a

few.) Hrothgar, grown powerful and rich, has his men build “a great mead-hall meant to be a wonder of the world forever; it would be his throne-room and there he would dispense his God-given goods to young and old.”[20] Archeologists have discovered and reconstructed such halls. As Heaney notes, “each lord's hall is an actual and a symbolic refuge.”[21] It is a carefully constructed oasis of light and civilization amidst the darkness and savagery of the northern woods, a place of music, poetry, drinking, and, most important of all, community.

Hrothgar names his hall Heorot, the word for a stag, a symbol of royalty. And Hrothgar himself is the embodiment of royalty; he upholds traditional customs and the values of courage, generosity, and loyalty. Yet the poet no sooner introduces Hrothgar's “dazzling stronghold” and “its gables wide and high” than he foretells its doom, “a barbarous burning” at the hands of the neighboring Heatho-Bards, joined to the Danes by ties of marriage that could not suppress a deadly feud: “the killer instinct unleashed among in-laws, the blood-lust rampant.”[22] This juxtaposition—of light and darkness, peace and violence, order and chaos, and civilization and its destruction—provides the constant and primary theme of the poem: nothing abides. We can build our Heorots, where the lights shine brightly, a wonder for all to see. But darkness is close and cannot be kept away. Only heroic courage and wisdom allow us even a temporary respite.

Heorot is already under siege from a source more terrible than the Heatho-Bards. The monster Grendel, “a prowler through the dark,” nurses a hard grievance against the community of men banqueting and rejoicing in the hall.[23] He is particularly offended by the sound of the harp and “the clear song of a skilled poet telling with mastery of man's beginnings, how the Almighty had made the earth a gleaming plain girdled with waters”[24]—an intriguing, if anachronistic, reference to Caedmon's song of creation, which would readily have been understood as such by the *Beowulf* poet's audience.

Grendel lives outside civilization, “haunting the marches, marauding round the heath and the desolate fens.”[25] He is literally an outlaw, of the tribe of Cain, cursed in his exile. The poet dubs him “a fiend out of hell.”[26] Grendel is the antithesis of the community of men, with its customs, its fellowship, and its control of violence. He is the embodiment of chaos, violence, and destruction.

The very existence of Heorot offends Grendel, and he assaults it after nightfall, when the men there have been feasting and are heavy with drink. He kills fifteen men and drags fifteen more back to his lair. The very next night he returns again. None can withstand him. Hrothgar is old and no longer a powerful warrior. He sits “stricken and helpless, humiliated by the loss of his guard.”[27] Seasoned

warriors, flushed with drink, occasionally pledge to protect Heorot and defeat Grendel. But each dies horribly in turn. Those left alive are riven with panic. None dares occupy Heorot after dark. The "legendary hall…lies deserted, empty and useless once the evening light hides itself under heaven's dome."[28] For twelve years this misery continues, and Hrothgar's followers dwindle in number. His sorrows are widely known—"sad lays were sung about the beset king."[29]

## BEOWULF COMES TO HEOROT

Beowulf, like Scyld, comes to the Danes unexpectedly from across the sea. He comes in search of glory, to repay a debt, and to forge an alliance. Beowulf is one of the Geatland peoples from southern Sweden. His father, Ecgtheow, once sought and received refuge from Hrothgar. Ecgtheow had killed a high-ranking member of a neighboring tribe and was sent into exile to avoid war. Hrothgar, then a new king, took him in despite the risk and eventually paid the *wergild* (man-price) that permitted Ecgtheow to return home, where he married the sister of Hygelac, the current king of the Geats.

When the stories about Grendel reach his ears, Beowulf orders a boat and sets out with fourteen other warriors. He is still a young man, but "with the strength of thirty in the grip of each hand."[30] His bearing is so noble and mighty that the watchman on the coast readily grants access to the armed band that disembarks so openly on the Danish shore. So, too, does the doorkeeper at Heorot, who urges his king to receive the strangers: "From their arms and appointment, they appear well born and worthy of respect, especially the one who has led them this far: he is formidable indeed."[31]

Hrothgar welcomes them, "an old man among retainers,"[32] but charged with new hope by the arrival of Beowulf, who offers to meet Grendel in single, hand-to-hand combat to the death. Since the monster eschews weapons, so too will Beowulf. "Whichever one death fells must deem it a just judgment by God," Beowulf solemnly notes, yet also adds, in a more appropriate, pagan vein, "Fate goes ever as fate must."[33]

The newcomers are invited to join the feast in the banquet hall, a feast that will pointedly end as darkness falls. The Danes and the Geats rejoice together, but the Danes are still wary. They know how formidable Grendel is. They have heard such challenges before. One of their number, Unferth, driven by envy, voices the concerns they all

must feel but Hrothgar himself could not politely express. Unferth has heard of Beowulf and is skeptical of his boasts. He mentions a swimming contest on the open sea with Breca and chides Beowulf for the recklessness and vanity that made him venture on the deep, claiming that Breca “outswam you, came ashore the stronger contender.”[34] However well you may have fared in prior battles, Unferth tells him, “this time you'll be worsted; no one has ever outlasted an entire night against Grendel.”[35]

Beowulf responds that Unferth is talking through his beer and, while acknowledging that the race with Breca was youthful bravado, insists that they matched stroke for stroke, neither gaining an advantage, through five days and nights before a storm separated them and hurled sea-brutes up from the deep. Nine such monsters he dispatched before finally reaching shore. He then silences the upstart once and for all by noting that Grendel has nothing to fear from Unferth, who has no reputation for courage or swordsmanship and has never dared to defend the hall of his king from Grendel:

> He knows he can trample down you Danes
> to his heart's content, humiliate and murder
> without fear of reprisal. But he will find me different.[36]

Instead of being offended by this denigration of their prowess, Hrothgar and the Danes rejoice in Beowulf's steadfastness of purpose. Wealhtheow, the wife of Hrothgar, enters the hall with a ceremonial mead cup, from which each man drinks in turn, starting with the king. When she comes to Beowulf, she welcomes and thanks him, and Beowulf now makes a formal pledge to conquer Grendel or die.

The hall echoes with loud and excited talk until “darkness gathered again over the world and stealthy night-shapes came stealing forth under the cloud-murk.”[37] Then, the king and his retainers hastily depart, entrusting the hall to Beowulf. “There's nothing you wish for that won't be yours,” Hrothgar promises, “if you win through alive.”[38]

## THE FIGHT WITH GRENDEL

The poet does not keep us in suspense about the outcome of the fight. Even before Grendel arrives at the hall, while the Geat warriors are settling in for the night, the poet tells us that through the strength of Beowulf they will prevail. Yet the encounter is still highly dramatic.

The poet shifts the focus—as a good film might do—to Grendel himself, “greedily loping” through the night, simultaneously enraged that men would dare to occupy the hall after dark and delighted at the opportunity they have provided him:

> his glee was demonic,
> picturing the mayhem: before morning
> he would rip life from limb and devour them.[39]

It is Grendel, however, who is in for a surprise. He rips open the iron-braced door and mauls and devours the first man he happens upon. He then moves to attack Beowulf, who is ready for him and grabs the monster in an armlock. Grendel recoils. He has never felt such strength. Suddenly terrified, he is desperate to flee back to his den, but he cannot escape the iron grip. Monster and man stumble, crash, and flail at one another, smashing mead benches and wreaking havoc inside the hall. With fingers bursting, Beowulf still will not let go. Beowulf's men try to join the fight, but their weapons are useless: “no blade on earth, no blacksmith's art could ever damage their demon opponent.”[40]

This is no mere physical combat; it is a moral one as well, and Beowulf must prevail through the force of his own will, personified in that grip with the strength of thirty men.[41] With a dreadful, unearthly wail, Grendel wrenches himself away. A wound opens, sinews split, and bones break. Grendel flees the hall, fatally hurt, leaving his shoulder, arm, and hand still held fast by Beowulf, who nails them to the roof of the hall as a sign of his triumph and the fulfillment of his pledge.

The next morning, the Danish retainers gaze in wonder at the massive arm and the shattered hall. They mount horses, with the young men trailing eagerly behind, and follow the bloody path taken by Grendel, “hauling his doom to the demons’ mere.”[42] There they find the water thick with Grendel's gore and wound-slurry:

> With his death upon him, he had dived deep
> into his marsh-den, drowned out his life
> and his heathen soul: hell claimed him there.[43]

The hall is quickly cleaned and restored for a celebration in honor of Beowulf. The *scop* (singer) extemporizes verses, lauding Beowulf as a new Sigemund, the dragon-slaying hero of Germanic legend. Hrothgar, freed of the curse that has marred the last decade of his

kingship, showers Beowulf with extravagant gifts and even more extravagant praise: “So now, Beowulf, I adopt you in my heart as a dear son,” he tells him.[44]

Heorot has once again become a place of light and safety and fellowship. “Inside Heorot there was nothing but friendship,” the poet states, but then, as usual, immediately introduces a somber note: “The Shielding nation was not yet familiar with feud and betrayal.”[45] After Hrothgar's death, his nephew, Hrothulf, will betray Hrothgar's young sons and seize the throne. The trusting Hrothgar seems oblivious of this danger. But his wife, Wealhtheow, is not. She first gently chastises her husband for expressing the wish to adopt Beowulf. The throne must go to his kin, and she urges Beowulf, whom she deliberately seats between them, to provide her two boys with guidance and support. She delivers a speech, addressed to Hrothgar but directed at Hrothulf, that is half pleading and half wishful thinking, and that will fail on both counts:

> I am certain of Hrothulf.
> He is noble and will use the young ones well.
> He will not let you down. Should you die before him,
> he will treat our children truly and fairly.
> He will honor, I am sure, our two sons,
> repay them in kind, when he recollects
> all the good things we gave him once.[46]

All that lies in the future. As the men drink wine and rejoice at their feast, a more imminent danger looms over them, undetected, for “how could they know fate, the grim shape of things to come…?”[47] The scholar Theodore Andersson rightly remarks that “the mood is always at the center of the poet's preoccupation.”[48] And the mood of *Beowulf* changes constantly, often darkening in the course of a single line.

## THE REVENGE OF GRENDEL'S DAM

Grendel's death will not go unavenged. Country folk had reportedly seen two such creatures prowling the moors, one of them still monstrous but smaller and in the shape of a woman. It is Grendel's mother. The genealogy of both mother and son is uncertain: “They are fatherless creatures, and their whole ancestry is hidden in a past of demons and ghosts.”[49] The poet again connects them with the

banished and accursed tribe of Cain.

Racked with grief and desperate for revenge, Grendel's mother descends upon the sleeping thanes at Heorot. Her attack is circumscribed, however, by her lesser strength and her greater fear. She seizes Aeschere—Hrothgar's closest and most valued advisor—and snatches the trophy that has been made of Grendel's arm and hand. When the awakened men take up their swords and shields, she flees in terror with her prizes. Having retrieved the rest of her son's remains and exacted only a kinsman's proper revenge—Hrothgar's dearest companion for her dear son—she retreats to her lair to mourn over Grendel's body.[50]

Beowulf, who had been given separate quarters, arrives after the fact and promptly resolves to set off in pursuit. Hrothgar warns him of the danger ahead: Grendel's mother lives in a mere, the depth of which has never been sounded. It is set in a frost-stiffened wood, tangled with tree roots, and the water uncannily burns at night. Even a hart fleeing from hounds will turn to face them and be torn apart rather than dive into the reptile-infested waters. But if Beowulf will brave the unknown “gap of danger where the demon waits,”[51] Hrothgar will give him gifts again, as lavish as the night before. “If you come back,” he adds ominously, and this time the poet offers no reassuring words as to the outcome. Beowulf will face a much greater and more ambiguous challenge in the dam's lair, and the outcome will remain in doubt until the very end. The simple tale of the hero conquering evil has become more nuanced and more deadly. Like Odysseus or Aeneas visiting the underworld, Beowulf will undergo a life-changing rite of passage.[52]

At the foot of a cliff overlooking the mere, Beowulf and his companions spy the head of Aeschere amidst an array of writhing monsters. The rest of the party sits down to watch at a safe distance, while Beowulf dons his armor, “indifferent to death.”[53] Unferth, in a gesture of admiration and amends, offers Beowulf his ancient sword, Hrunting, which has never failed in battle. It will, however, fail Beowulf today. Beowulf gives a short and simple speech. He makes no boasts and predicts no victory. Instead, he asks Hrothgar to look after his young comrades in arms, in the event he does not return, and to send the treasures he has received to Hygelac, lord of the Geats. “With Hrunting I shall gain glory or die,” he concludes, and plunges suddenly into the depths of the lake.[54]

Grendel's mother darts up from her lair and catches Beowulf in a brutal grip. Her savage talons cannot rip the chain-mail shirt he wears, but she carries him to her grotto at the bottom of the mere. It is a grim inversion of the hall at Heorot. There is air and even a fire

burning in the corner. The walls are hung with old armor and weapons. Beowulf swings at her with Unferth's sword, but the shining blade will not bite; its legendary power fails against her. They fight hand to hand, and she “grapple[s] him tightly in her grim embrace.”[55] Some scholars see sexual imagery in the fight, and there is a reason—even aside from tickets sales—why a recent movie cast Angelina Jolie as Beowulf's deadliest nemesis. When he stumbles, she leaps astride him and stabs at him with a broad, whetted knife. Once again, only the strong mesh of his war-shirt saves Beowulf's life. Finally knocking her aside, he sees in her armory an ancient sword from the days of the giants. He grabs the hilt firmly and severs her head with a savage blow. Beowulf triumphs and survives, but only through heaven's happenstance.

With the great sword held aloft, Beowulf inspects the grotto. Finding the body of Grendel, Beowulf cuts off its head in a final act of vengeance. Blood boils up from the mere, and the Danish watchers on the shore give way to despair:

> They bowed gray heads,
> spoke in their sage, experienced way
> about the good warrior, how they never again
> expected to see that prince returning
> in triumph to their king. It was clear to many
> that the wolf of the deep had destroyed him forever.[56]

The resigned Scyldings and their king return home sick at heart. But the War-Geats remain steadfast, staring intently at the heaving waters, hoping beyond hope for the return of their lord.

After beheading Grendel, the powerful sword blade melts away and dissolves, leaving only the jewel-encrusted, rune-covered hilt. (This post-coital image has provided much fodder for the scholars.) Beowulf spurns the myriad treasures in the cave. He takes with him only the sword hilt, Hrunting, and Grendel's head as he struggles to the surface and reunion with his faithful comrades. It requires four men to carry the head back to Heorot, where Beowulf drops it at the feet of the king and queen, who are struck dumb with horror and awe.

Beowulf presents Hrothgar with the ancient sword-hilt and returns Hrunting to Unferth, noting that he found it a powerful help and graciously eliding its failure. The celebration is now complete, yet the king elects to offer Beowulf some wisdom along with the new set of gifts. This speech, commonly known as “Hrothgar's sermon,” is deeply felt but somewhat undermined by the “sage, experienced way” the Danes had previously despaired of and abandoned Beowulf.

Hrothgar praises Beowulf for his prowess, his even temper, and his resolve. He predicts a brilliant future. Yet he also warns Beowulf against pride and greed. Hrothgar cites the example of Heremod, an earlier Danish king, whom God had made "eminent and powerful and marked him from the start for a happy life."[57] But Heremod grew bloodthirsty and violent and no longer gave gifts to his people. He brought them little joy and much sorrow.

Hrothgar claims, in Seamus Heaney's lovely translation, to have "wintered into wisdom" after the triumphs of his youth and the reversals of his old age. For fifty years he ruled the Danes and kept them safe with his spear and his sword. Yet he was powerless when Grendel laid waste to the land. Each man forgets that whatever good fortune he enjoys will inevitably end. When "the whole world conforms to his will," a man is untroubled by illness, old age, and "enemies with their hate-honed swords."[58] He succumbs to *hubris*, the overweening pride that precedes that "hard reversal from bliss to grief."[59] Hrothgar urges Beowulf to bow before Almighty God, to choose "the better part, eternal rewards,"[60] and to be ever mindful of the fragility of worldly success. Beowulf hears Hrothgar's words with heartfelt joy and gratitude.

Beowulf and his men recross the sea and return in triumph to the land of the Geats. There, Beowulf presents the Danish gifts to his king, Hygelac, who rewards him munificently with land, a hall, and a gift-chair of his own. Beowulf honors his uncle and is honored in turn, as kinsmen ought to do. But this harmony is soon shattered. Hygelac is killed in a reckless raid on the Franks. His widow urges Beowulf to take the throne in place of her young son, Heardred, but he declines, and instead mentors, protects, and supports the new prince. Yet Heardred is cut down as well in an invasion by the Swedes:

> The wide kingdom
> reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well
> for fifty winters, grew old and wise
> as warden of the land until…[61]

There is always an "until" in *Beowulf*—thirty-six of them to be exact.[62] Fifty years have passed. Beowulf, who must be around seventy-five, has become, like Hrothgar, a beloved and elderly king facing an unexpected and deadly new challenge. Yet, unlike Hrothgar, Beowulf will once more don armor and meet that challenge himself. We should read this final section of the poem with Tennyson's immortal tribute to Odysseus ringing in our ears:

Tho' much is taken, much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are;
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.[63]

## A DRAGON WAKES

The abrupt transition from Beowulf's youth to his old age, passing over fifty years in a handful of lines, has led some scholars to suggest that two separate poems have been uneasily stitched together. Certainly, the heroic, epic tone of the first portion has given way to something more somber and elegiac. Yet, as in the *Aeneid*, the elegiac note has been sounded from the start, and the fact that it now comes to the fore is to be expected as Beowulf approaches his end. This is a poem about contrasts. The first half emphasizes the *fortitudo* (prowess) of youth, and the second half the *sapientia* (wisdom) of age.[64] But, while the mood appropriately darkens, it does not fundamentally change. This poem about contrasts is itself a unified whole. Or, more precisely, it is a triptych, whose three panels depict the superhuman battles—with Grendel, Grendel's dam, and the dragon—in a hero's life.[65]

The appearance of the dragon among the Geats is as sudden and devastating as Grendel's was to the Danes. An ancient treasure, the legacy of an extinguished people, was hidden deep in a barrow (burial mound) by the last survivor, who mourned the passing of his race:

Now, earth, hold what earls once held
and heroes can no more; it was mined from you first
by honorable men. My own people
have been ruined in war; one by one
they went down to death, looked their last
on sweet life in the hall. I am left with nobody
to bear a sword or to burnish plated goblets.[66]

This will be the fate of the Geat people as well. They will disappear from history, ruined in war once their mighty king falls, and tied to that earlier lost race by a treasure that neither will enjoy.

The treasure has a guardian, a fire-breathing dragon, who has stoutly but quietly watched over it through the centuries, until…One

day, a servant, fleeing from the heavy hand of his master, happens upon the hidden entrance to the barrow. He panics when he sees the sleeping dragon and flees in terror, but first grabs a gold-plated cup that he presents to his lord, begging for reinstatement. The awakened dragon, furious at the intrusion and theft, lays waste the land, hurtling through the night, belching flames that burn homesteads and kill men and animals alike. Even the hall of Beowulf, the throne-room of the Geats, is destroyed.

Beowulf cannot understand this sudden misfortune. “His mind was in turmoil, unaccustomed anxiety and gloom confused his brain.”[67] He worries that he, himself, through some unknown transgression, has brought this disaster upon his people. But he soon learns of the trespassing slave and the stolen cup, and he resolves to confront the dragon. He has an iron shield prepared to block the belching flames, and he sets off with eleven comrades and the press-ganged slave to guide them. There is no suspense about the outcome; the poet tells us that both Beowulf and the dragon will die in the encounter. Beowulf does not know this, but he strongly suspects that his leasehold on life is at its end:

> He was sad at heart,
> unsettled yet ready, sensing his death.
> His fate hovered near, unknowable but certain:
> it would soon claim his coffered soul,
> part life from limb.[68]

Yet Beowulf does not fear, and never has feared, death. He fears only for the fate of his people. Without him, feuds with the Franks and the Swedes, which have been suppressed only by Beowulf's remarkable prowess, will inevitably burst forth again and overwhelm the Geats. He fully recognizes the dilemma in which he is placed, and he reminisces about King Hrethel, the father of Hygelac, who had three sons, one of whom accidentally killed the first-born with an errant bow shot. According to law, kindred blood must be avenged, yet Hrethel was helpless to set the wrong to rights. Heartsore, he turned away from life's joys and faded away, as Hrothgar was in danger of doing after Grendel began his attacks.

Like Hrethel and Hrothgar, Beowulf cannot set the situation to rights. The demands upon him are conflicting and unresolvable.[69] He neither can let the dragon devastate his people nor, if he dies fighting the dragon, continue to protect the Geats from their hate-sharpened enemies. Yet Beowulf will not sit passively as Hrothgar did; nor will he simply despair and turn away like Hrethel. He chooses, as always,

the route of courage, dealing with the first and most immediate threat: “I was ever at the front line of any battle,” Beowulf boasts, “and I shall fight like that for as long as I live, as long as this sword shall last.”[70]

Cautioning his men to hang back in safety, Beowulf enters the dragon's lair alone. The shield protects him long enough to strike with his sword at the dragon's scales, but his once mighty arm is no longer powerful enough to punch through them. Beowulf, for the first time in his life, gives ground and is sorely pressed. His hand-picked troops, the finest of the Geats, flee in terror—all but one. Young Wiglaf, cousin of Beowulf, never yet tested in battle, reproaches his companions for forgetting their pledges of loyalty and all the honors and gifts lavished upon them. He rushes to stand by and support his lord. They both shelter behind the flame-blocking shield, where Beowulf summons new resolution and delivers a mighty blow to the dragon's skull, only to have his ancient sword snap. The dragon sinks sharp fangs into Beowulf's neck. Wiglaf drives his own sword into the unprotected belly of the beast. Beowulf draws a stabbing knife from his belt and, gathering his final strength, delivers a deep, killing blow to the dragon's flank.

The dragon is dead, but its poison is already coursing through Beowulf's body. He props himself upon the rampart of the dragon's lair as Wiglaf removes his helmet and bathes his wounds with water. Beowulf sends Wiglaf into the barrow to retrieve some portion of the treasure trove and lay it before him. Beowulf has no son into whose keeping he can bequeath his kingdom. Wiglaf will inherit his armor and the almost-impossible job of checking the forces arrayed against the Geats, forces that will only be emboldened by the cowardice displayed by the leading thanes. Yet Beowulf hopes the treasure will help to support his people in his absence. “You are the last of us,” he tells Wiglaf, the only one left of his family line.[71]

> Fate swept us away,
> sent my whole brave highborn clan
> to their final doom. Now I must follow them.[72]

## THE GERMANIC WARRIOR HERO

Beowulf is the embodiment of the Germanic warrior hero. He is a man of deeds and a man of words. “Anyone with gumption and a sharp mind,” the Danish watchman opines at the outset, “will take the measure of two things: what's said and what's done.”[73] In both

regards, he is impressed with Beowulf. So too, of course, is Hrothgar, who sums up his regard as follows:

> I have never heard
> so young a man make truer observations.
> You are strong in body and mature in mind,
> impressive in speech.[74]

This "*sapientia et fortitudo* ideal," R. E. Kaske writes, is "the most basic theme in the poem."[75] With the strength of thirty, Beowulf surely has *fortitudo*. *Sapientia* generally develops through the years, often waxing as *fortitudo* wanes. But Beowulf possesses it from a young age. *Sapientia* is not just wisdom but practical and oratorical skill, foresight, cleverness, and even guile. One could easily substitute the Greek term used for Odysseus, πολύτροπον, skilled in all ways of contending.

The opening lines of the poem praise the prudence and discretion of Scyld's young son, Beow, who gave freely while his father lived and thus built powerful ties with his companions, and had already earned their loyalty when the time came for him to rule. "Behavior that's admired," the poet notes, "is the path to power among people everywhere."[76] Beowulf follows that path. Not only does he win renown for his deeds, but he honors his uncle and, shunning any form of secret plotting, declines to usurp the throne from his young cousin. Away from the battlefield, he controls his strength and his temper, never giving way to violence. He is well-spoken, is insightful, and even deploys humor to great effect, as in his verbal sparring with Unferth. The youthful bravado of his swimming match with Breca ripens to something more solid and secure as he works for the good of his people. Hrothgar, when we meet him, embodies *sapientia* but lacks *fortitudo*. Hygelac, killed in a reckless raid, is the opposite. Beowulf has both.

In Germanic warrior culture, the king held absolute authority for good or (in the example of Heremod in Hrothgar's sermon) for ill. All spoils of war belong by rights to the king. He then dispenses them to his thanes in proportion to their merits and seniority. In return, they owe him absolute and unconditional loyalty. They must readily lay down their lives for him. That is a duty that Beowulf's warriors honored in the fight against Grendel, when they "worked to defend their lord's life, laying about them as best they could, with their ancestral blades."[77] But, having grown soft under Beowulf's protection, they fail dismally in the fight with the dragon and thus invite their own destruction.

The only ties more important than those of the warrior band are the bonds of kinship. The murder of a kinsman—even in a fair fight in open warfare—must be avenged with blood or *wergild*, the man-price determined by the deceased's rank.[78] This revenge culture led to extended feuds—and the ever-present prospect of violence—that even marital alliances could not always resolve. Beowulf adheres to this non-Christian code, explaining to Hrothgar that "it is always better to avenge dear ones than to indulge in mourning."[79] Action soothes grief and brings glory, which is more important than a long life:

> For every one of us, living in this world
> means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
> win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
> that will be his best and only bulwark.[80]

In this life, the wheel of fortune (*wyrd*) will turn and no man can stop it. He can only play his part heroically, as Beowulf does.

Some scholars suggest that Beowulf is unduly reckless in attacking the dragon and overeager to seize the treasure. He thereby dooms his people to a miserable fate of slaughter and subjugation, a result that "puts heroism in a questionable light" and reveals "the emptiness of heroic posture."[81] Nothing could be further from the poet's intention. There is certainly an element of bravado in Beowulf's fight with the dragon,[82] as there was in each of his great battles. But he did not display the rashness of Hygelac in his fatal raid on the Franks. Nor, of course, did he opt for the passivity of Hrothgar, waiting for some other hero to fight in his place. Beowulf made a considered choice among bad options and hoped once more to claim the victory. His prowess as a warrior was unmatched, but so too were his wisdom, generosity, and loyalty. In the words of Wiglaf, "He held to his high destiny."[83]

## THE PEACE WEAVERS

Although the *Beowulf* poet celebrates Beowulf's heroic posture and capacity for directed violence, there is an important qualification framed in the poem. Except for a couple of brief, retrospective references, we see Beowulf engaged only against superhuman monsters, not against other Germanic tribes. Beowulf is a defender, not a destroyer, of community.

In an honor society, in which blood begets blood and ambition sometimes overwhelms even family ties, violence is never far below the surface and always threatens to erupt. We see this constant, terrifying threat from the perspective of the women, whose difficult and often-impossible task is to tamp down feuds and maintain a fragile peace. These “peace weavers” cement alliances and, through their children, create blood ties between former enemies.

We have already seen the way in which Wealhtheow soothed and flattered her husband's thanes and quietly encouraged Beowulf to formalize his pledge to kill Grendel.[84] After the battle, she gently checks her husband's enthusiasm to adopt Beowulf; deftly enlists Beowulf, through gifts of her own, as a mentor and protector of her sons; and diplomatically reminds Hrothulf of all that he owes to his uncle and his young cousins.[85] Wealhtheow is in some ways wiser than Hrothgar. For all that, the strong implication is that her efforts on behalf of her sons will fail once her husband dies.

Indeed, even as Wealhtheow enters the mead hall, the poet is singing of the sorrows of Hildeburh, an earlier Danish princess who was married to the Frisian king Finn.[86] When Hildeburh's brother, the Danish king Hnaef, came to Frisia on a peaceful visit, a band of Jutes stirred up an old feud, and a fierce, if short, fight broke out. Hildeburh's brother and her son were both killed before a truce could be established. The Danes, now under the leadership of Hengest, remained in Frisia through the winter under the terms of that truce. But, as spring arrived, the desire for vengeance trumped the desire for home. When a thane laid a sword in Hengest's lap as a reminder of the need to vindicate his honor, he and his men cut down Finn, sacked the hall, and carried Hildeburh back to Daneland. She had lost everything —husband, son, brother, and marital home.

Beowulf sadly foresees a similar fate for Hrothgar's daughter, Freawaru. She will marry Ingeld, the king of the Danes’ old enemy, the Heatho-Bards. Ingeld's father, Froda, had been killed along with many of his men by the Danes. Beowulf doubts that Freawaru, however admirable, will keep the old hostility from breaking forth. At the wedding, he suggests, some Heatho-Bard veteran of the prior war will recognize the sword and armor of a fallen comrade and goad the son of the slain man into killing the Danish warrior:

> Then on both sides the oath-bound lords
> will break the peace, a passionate hate
> will build up in Ingeld, and love for his bride
> will falter in him as the feud rankles.[87]

Beowulf clearly laments the likely fate of his Danish allies. He is

not a man who foments hatred. And yet, as he told Hrothgar, he adheres to the honor code that loved ones must be avenged and that violence is the best remedy for grief. The *Beowulf* poet, as a Christian monk, calls that code into question with his tales of Hildeburh and Freawaru. It is this double perspective that lends both depth and melancholy to the poem and that has led many commenters to find in its pages a strongly Christian message.

## A CHRISTIAN POEM?

In an 1878 article, the critic F. A. Blackburn called *Beowulf* a "heathen poem" with "Christian coloring."[88] He counted sixty-eight passages in the poem that seem "to suggest something in Christian usage or doctrine"[89] and divided them into four categories: first, allusions to the Bible—the creation, Cain and Abel, and the flood (3); second, disapproval of heathen worship (1); third, references to vaguely Christian doctrines, such as heaven, hell, and the day of judgment (10); and, fourth, incidental allusions to God, his power, his goodness, and so on (54). Yet he found not a single reference to Christ, the cross, or the atonement of sins, nor any references to the Trinity or miracles. The final poem, he concluded, reflects at most a "vague and colorless Christianity."[90] Blackburn accordingly asserted with some confidence that "*Beowulf* once existed as a whole without the Christian allusions."[91] He believed that the numerous Christian references were interpolated by "some monkish copyist, whose piety exceeded his poetic powers."[92]

Other scholars, however, have been equally confident that "the Christianity of the poem is so deeply embedded in the texture of the epic that it could not have been interpolated."[93] Some have even transformed the poem into a Christian allegory of salvation, with Beowulf as Christ and the various monsters he fights as incarnations of the devil.[94] Grendel and his mother, they note, are descendants of Cain; the burning, serpent-infested mere fits a medieval description of hell; Beowulf has twelve companions (apostles) on the day of his final trial; and his soul seems to be carried up to heaven upon his death. "Thus, in succession of ideas and motifs," one writes, "there is a significant parallel between Beowulf's adventure and Christ's death, harrowing of hell, and resurrection."[95]

Both extremes have been largely abandoned today in favor of the commonsense view that Beowulf was composed by a Christian poet

who had a great interest in and sensitivity to a lost pagan culture, and yet never lost sight of his own Christian beliefs and those of his audience. The poet does not turn the Geats and the Danes into Christians, but he does look at their stories from a Christian perspective, which believes in God's providence and, ultimately, his grace. Reading *Beowulf* as a Christian allegory not only is strained but also robs the poem of much of its interest and pagan power. Yet, ignoring the Christian perspective of the poet is an equal falsification. "Our sense of the *depth* of the poem," scholar Margaret Goldsmith rightly notes, comes not just from its backward look into a darker antiquity, but also "from its own Christian perspective, which gives the adventures another dimension."[96] The Christian "coloring"—the references to the Bible and to God's providence—lets the poet faithfully tell the story of a great pagan hero who fights with superhuman monsters, and yet retain his Christian perspective on that story. It is precisely this double perspective, this blending of cultures, that gives the poem its feeling of hard-won wisdom.

It is not implausible that a Christian poet of the Middle Ages would show such interest in and respect for a pagan culture. Indeed, such sympathy was sufficiently commonplace to be condemned by the English churchman Alcuin of York. In a letter to the monks at Lindisfarne, an important center of monastic learning, Alcuin harshly criticized the copying and preservation of pagan works, and even referenced a pagan hero mentioned in *Beowulf*: "What has Ingeld to do with Christ? Narrow is the house; it cannot hold both. The King of Heaven wants no fellowship at all with pagan and damned kings."[97] Yet not all were so intolerant. As noted previously, Gregory the Great himself encouraged his missionaries to incorporate pagan customs and festivals into the church calendar. Bede, too, was more sympathetic to the pagan heritage of the English people. Not all churchmen would so readily condemn virtuous pagans to hellfire, and certainly not the poet of *Beowulf*.

The *Beowulf* poet wears his own Christianity lightly. As Blackburn notes, ideas of heaven, hell, and God's justice, as well as scattered Old Testament references, are all to be found in the poem. But, for the most part, those ideas are superimposed by the narrator as a gloss for his Christian audience. They are the frame through which he celebrates an ancient culture to which Christianity was obviously unknown and inaccessible. We therefore have to distinguish the narrator's Christian perspective from the pagan perspective of the characters. The poet is usually quite careful to keep them separate. He does not avoid anachronism altogether, but that was true of Homer as well, who introduced funeral pyres long before they were actually used among the Greeks. Although the Germanic tribes were

traditionally polytheistic, those in *Beowulf* are portrayed as monotheists. They never make reference to Wotan or any of the other gods of their mythology. The creation song of the *scop* is another anachronism, but of the most subtle and gentle sort; it is an insider's reference, delivered with a wink at the audience.

The references to Cain and the flood, by contrast, are not anachronisms. They are the narrator's explanations for his Christian audience, unknown to the characters themselves, as is his aside on the futility of pagan offerings to idols. As another scholar notes, the analogy between Cain and Grendel is particularly well sustained: "Guilty alike of envy, anger, murder, and impenitence, both were outlaws from the genial fellowship of men and estranged from the favor of God."[98] Even Hrothgar's sermon can be read as purely secular, though the reader hears the Christian echoes intended by the poet.[99] Again, these echoes give the poem much of its depth; they present "the poet as brooding intellectual, poised between a dying pagan world and a nascent Christian one."[100]

Revenge killing aside, the pagan virtues celebrated in the poem—courage, wisdom, generosity, loyalty—are not so very different from virtues recognized by medieval Christians. So, too, are many of the poem's main themes—the power of fate, the transience of all human joy, the inevitability of sorrow and death, the importance of courage, and the destructive futility of hatred, pride, and covetousness. Those themes are all consonant with Christianity, but they already had a settled place in classical pagan literature from Homer through Virgil. Even the many references to God's providence are not so very different from the pagan concept of *wyrd*. Indeed, the poet tries to forge a conscious connection between the two for his readers. God's providence or fate will determine the outcome. Both Augustine and Boethius also wrestled with the relationship between the two.

*Beowulf* is not so much a poem about pagans by a Christian poet as it is a poem about heroic forebears by a poet who celebrates and even laments a lost warrior culture, however different it might be from his own. Beowulf himself is neither a pagan hero nor an allegorized Christian one—the distinction would have been meaningless to him. He is an idealized Germanic warrior king who fights for glory and for his people according to the values of his time and his tribe. We cannot control fate. Disease, chaos, evil, and death are all out there, and inevitably they will disrupt or even destroy our carefully constructed halls of light and civilization. Beowulf fights back the darkness that threatens to overwhelm his people.[101] It is a losing battle but one fought with dignity and courage.

The poem ends with a fitting eulogy for Beowulf: "Of all the kings upon the earth," the poet writes, "he was the man most gracious and

fair-minded, kindest to his people and keenest to win fame."[102] The last word of the poem is "*lofgeornost*" (most eager for praise, fame), which circles back to "*lofdaedum*" (behavior that is admired) in line 24.[103] It is not a Christian virtue, but it summarizes the warrior code by which Beowulf lives. Glory, which must be earned through heroism, is the only guarantor of immortality.

The poet, notwithstanding his Christianity, plainly admires this kind of glory. He also admires the hard-won wisdom shown by Beowulf throughout his life. But he does not falsify the poem by granting Beowulf salvation in any Christian sense. Beowulf joins his ancestors in death. "His soul fled from his breast to its destined place among the steadfast ones," the poet writes.[104] That is not a Christian heaven. The end of the poem returns to its beginning, to the funeral of the great Danish hero Scyld. Beowulf is placed in a boat along with the treasure from the dragon's lair. The Geats bury the boat under a huge barrow on a cliff overlooking the sea. In "a scene of strange and somber majesty,"[105] an old woman keens the coming destruction of the Geat people as twelve warriors ride silently around the barrow. It is a fitting tribute not just to Beowulf but to an entire culture—a culture now lost to us in time but preserved in the living monument that is *Beowulf*.

# Chapter 5

# ABELARD AND HELOISE

Scholars often refer to the twelfth century as an early Renaissance, and for good reason. Certainly, the twelfth century marks the end of the Dark Ages, if that term was ever apt for the period after the death of Boethius in 524, when western Europe saw a sharp decline in classical learning and scholarship as well as in the standard of living for ordinary men and women. If not a full Renaissance, the twelfth century at least signals the beginning of the High Middle Ages.

Latin was still the language of the church and of the schools and monasteries sponsored by the church. There was, at the beginning of the century, little or no vernacular literature. But the Latin literature available to students extended beyond Saint Jerome's Latin Bible, known as the Vulgate, and the writings of the church fathers. Roman philosophers were increasingly read and admired. The writings of Aristotle (beyond the narrow logical treatises on which Boethius and Porphyry had written commentaries) were, by the end of the century, beginning to arrive in western Europe as well in Latin translations. The love poetry of Ovid sparked the outpouring of Latin secular verse collected in the *Carmina Burana*,[1] followed by a veritable explosion of vernacular romances, some of which we will study in the next chapter.

There was also a radical and controversial change in church music away from plainchant (where a single note was sung for each syllable) and toward polyphony (with two or more simultaneous lines of melody). The movement was led by Leoninus, the musician at the Cathedral of Notre-Dame, and it traveled through the first polyphonic mass, *La Messe de Nostre Dame*, composed by Guillaume de Machaut in 1364, all the way to Palestrina's triumphant *Pope Marcellus Mass* in 1562. Gothic architecture—with its pointed arches, ribbed vaults, and

flying buttresses—also flourished in the cathedrals and churches built during this period. And the first universities began to grow out of the church "schools" in Paris and elsewhere. They included the Universities of Bologna (1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), and Cambridge (1209).

This was the world into which Peter Abelard and his lifelong love, Heloise, were born. They were, or at least viewed themselves as being, at the cutting edge of modernity and were thereby swept into and almost destroyed by the raging controversies—religious, moral, and political—of their day. Abelard was a champion of the use of reason in matters of faith. Nothing can be believed, he contended, unless it is first understood.[2] He even compiled a massive catalogue, entitled *Sic et Non* ("Yes and No"), listing contradictions in the writings of the church fathers on doctrinal issues, as a means of provoking discussion and debate. "*Dubitando quippe ad inquisitionem venimus*," he wrote in the preface, "*inquirendo veritatem percipimus*" ("By doubting we come to inquiry; by inquiry we perceive the truth.").[3]

Certainly, Abelard is no one's idea of a pious medieval monk. He was the foremost philosopher of his generation, as well as a combative logician and charismatic teacher. He was a bold thinker and moralist who provoked enmity and fierce loyalty in equal measure. He was a celebrated composer and singer of love songs, some of which found their way into the *Carmina Burana*.[4] He entered monastic life more from shame than devotion, and he continued to serve as a polarizing figure. He was twice condemned as a heretic because, among other reasons, he refused to believe that virtuous pagans (in particular, his philosopher heroes) were damned simply because they were born before Christ died on the cross for their sins.

Heloise is no one's idea of a devout medieval abbess. She was a brilliant scholar who mastered Hebrew and Greek, as well as Latin. She studied the Roman poets and Cicero and Seneca. Some of her secular love poems are also believed to have survived in the *Carmina Burana*. She eagerly followed Abelard's teachings on logic and helped to develop his ideas on ethics. Enthralled by her teacher, she threw herself into a passionate affair that ended in disaster for both. She took the veil only in obedience to his wishes and never abandoned the love about which she wrote with such astonishing frankness, beauty, and intelligence. Although Heloise skillfully and diplomatically developed a small sanctuary into a highly successful convent, rich in donations and respect, she viewed the achievement as hollow. She accepted the tenets of her faith but insisted that her heart belonged first to Abelard, not to God. Where Abelard, in retrospect, saw their affair as a failure of faith, she saw it as the triumph and tragedy of love. She would accept no moral or theological worldview that

condemned their passion.

Abelard was one of the most important and original thinkers of the Middle Ages. He wrote extensively and brilliantly on logic, ethics, and theology. He explored in a very modern way the gap between word and meaning, between intention and action, and between the inner reality of faith and the doctrines of the church. As Eileen Sweeney, one of the most incisive authorities on Abelard, puts it, "Abelard grimly and defiantly dwells in the gap between what we say and what is, and he draws attention to the failure of faith and understanding to bridge the gap between words and things."[5] Although Abelard does not believe we can bridge that gap, he believes that, in the effort to do so, we find our closest approximation to integrity, wisdom, and a fully realized life.

Despite the brilliance and originality of his writings on logic and theology, Abelard is best known for the letters he wrote to—and, even more important, received from—Heloise. She learned well from her teacher. There is a continuity between his scholarly work and the idealized conception of love that she articulates in her letters, a love at once spiritual, intellectual, physical, and emotional, a love that combines the *amor* (physical passion) of Ovid with the *amicitia* (friendship) of Cicero and the *dilectio* (spiritual love) of the scriptures.[6] Heloise, like Abelard, recognizes the inevitable gap between physical intimacy and complete emotional and spiritual union. And she, like Abelard, found her greatness in the attempt to bridge that gap.

## HISTORY OF HIS CALAMITIES

In 1133, Abelard produced a remarkable memoir or autobiography, completely unlike those of Augustine and Boethius. He called it *Historia Calamitatum*, or the *History of His Calamities*. The ostensible occasion for writing this work—likely a literary device rather than prompted by any actual need—is to provide consolation to another monk undergoing trials of his own. Abelard professes to hope that his own example will put matters in perspective for the monk. In essence, Abelard is saying, "If you think you have it bad, wait until you hear what happened to me. Your troubles are nothing compared with mine." Indeed, that was undoubtedly the case, regardless of the condition of the hypothetical recipient.

Abelard was born around 1079 in the small town of Le Pallet near the border of Celtic Brittany. He was the oldest of five children. His father, Berengar, was a landowner and a knight, but also a man of

some, if modest, education. Berengar wanted more for his sons and insisted that they study letters before they were trained in arms. He took special care in the education of his obviously bright eldest son, sending him off at the age of fourteen to study with the renowned Roscelin of Compiègne. It was perhaps an odd choice of teachers. Roscelin had been found guilty of heresy in 1092 and was forced to recant his views on the Trinity. But he was a brilliant logician and theologian, and Abelard stayed with him for six years. Although they subsequently had a bitter falling out and Abelard tried to minimize his debt to Roscelin—a pattern Abelard would repeat with each of his three main teachers—it is clear that Roscelin was a powerful influence in shaping his later thought. Abelard's self-acknowledged "volatile temperament," which he attributed to his ancestry, and his "natural ability for learning"[7] were already evident.

Under the rules of primogeniture, Abelard stood to inherit his father's estate and knighthood. But, filled with a passion for learning and for fame as a logician, he renounced his rights as firstborn in favor of his younger brothers. "I preferred the weapons of dialectic to all the other teachings of philosophy," he explains, "and armed with these I chose the conflicts of disputation instead of the trophies of war."[8] The analogy is an apt one, for Abelard treated philosophy as a battle of wits for fame and students. He traveled to Paris, at the age of twenty-one, determined to win both.

Abelard started out as a student of William of Champeaux, master of the cathedral school of Notre-Dame. The school was in what is still called the "Latin Quarter" of Paris because the students were obliged to speak only Latin to one another, even in the taverns. Abelard himself notes that William was the "supreme master" of dialectic (the art of logical argument), "both in reputation and in fact."[9] As such, he was a worthy target of Abelard's own ambitions, and Abelard immediately began to challenge William's arguments. Abelard claims to have bested William in debate on several occasions, irritating both William and the leaders among his fellow students. "This was the beginning of the misfortunes which have dogged me to this day," he writes, "and as my reputation grew, so other men's jealousy was aroused."[10]

Despite his youth, Abelard decided to found a school of his own. He did so in 1102 at Melun, twenty-five miles from Paris, with the help of his lifelong protector and promoter, Stephen de Garlande. Stephen then served as a minister to the king, and Abelard's fortunes throughout his career would rise and fall with those of his patron and his patron's family, though Abelard rarely and only obliquely acknowledges this connection in his memoir.

Students flocked to Abelard, and his reputation spread to the

detriment of that of William. Abelard soon moved his school closer to Paris, to Corbeil, where he could “embarrass” William “through more frequent encounters in disputation.”[11] But Abelard appears to have suffered some sort of breakdown during this period, though he says only, “I fell ill through overwork.”[12] He returned home to Le Pallet and remained there for three years. Students continued to seek him out despite the remoteness of his place of convalescence.

By the time Abelard returned to Paris, William was bishop of Châlons, though he continued to lecture at the cathedral school. Abelard began to challenge him more frequently and even forced William to acknowledge publicly that his view of universals was incorrect. The status of universals—words for generic qualities such as “white” or “man” shared by numerous individual objects—was a key issue in philosophy (and, indeed, has remained so in somewhat mutated form to this day). Abelard gives only a brief, obscure account of the issue in his memoir. Very roughly, William followed Plato in viewing universals as naming essences in which individual things partake (a position known as realism), whereas Abelard followed Aristotle in treating universals as naming accidental qualities that are attributable to individual things (a position known as nominalism). The issue, which is important both in metaphysics (in determining what exists) and in logic (in determining how words gain their meaning) and has spillover effects in theology and ethics, is discussed more fully below.

After this public defeat, Abelard claims that William's hitherto most loyal students transferred their allegiance to Abelard and that even William's successor as the master of the cathedral school of Notre-Dame offered to resign his chair in favor of Abelard. But William was so consumed with anger and jealousy that he blocked the appointment and put the chair into the hands of someone hostile to Abelard. Abelard accordingly returned with his students in tow first to Melun and then to Mont-Sainte-Geneviève, on the outskirts of Paris. Quoting Ovid—“Envy seeks the heights, the winds sweep the summits”—Abelard notes that William's jealousy and efforts to thwart him merely increased Abelard's own reputation as the foremost dialectician of his day.[13]

Abelard returned home again in 1112 to assist his parents in entering separate religious institutions. It was, at that time, a not uncommon form of retirement for the well-to-do, as they disposed of their property, prepared for the future life, and ensured that they would be cared for in this one. Abelard then made a surprising shift and went to study divinity with Anselm of Laon, recognized as the foremost authority of his day on biblical exegesis. Despite Anselm's reputation and his fluidity as a speaker, Abelard found him vacuous.

He compared Anselm to smoke without fire or a tree in full leaf that was nonetheless barren. Abelard began to neglect Anselm's lectures, to the annoyance of the leading students. Two in particular—Alberic of Rheims and Lotulf of Lombardy—developed an intense hatred of Abelard, which would have serious consequences a decade later.

When other students jokingly challenged Abelard to offer his own gloss on scriptural commentaries, he undertook to do so. Indeed, he gave a lecture on an obscure passage from Ezekiel the very next day. Only a few students attended, but those who did urged him to continue, and the number of students grew with each succeeding lecture until Anselm, "wildly jealous" and urged on by Alberic and Lotulf, forbade Abelard to continue.[14]

Abelard returned to Paris in 1114 as master of the cathedral school of Notre-Dame, the position he had long considered to be his rightful due. His reputation in scriptural interpretation soon stood as high as his earlier reputation in philosophy. Students throughout Europe were drawn to his lectures. At this time, Abelard was known to all and at the height of his success. This happy state lasted only four years. As Abelard himself explains, "Success always puffs up fools with pride, and worldly security weakens the spirit's resolution and easily destroys it through carnal temptations."[15] He began to think of himself not just as the foremost thinker in the world, but also as invincible.

Abelard had a justified reputation for sexual abstinence, which, ironically, proved his undoing. A young woman named Heloise caught his eye. "In looks she did not rank lowest," he explains, "while in the extent of her learning she stood supreme."[16] Heloise was the niece of Fulbert, a canon of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame who had taken great care of her education and reveled in her reputation as a scholar. Abelard, hoping to arrange daily meetings with the girl, sought to take lodgings with Fulbert and offered to give lessons to Heloise. Fulbert, in complete trust, gave Abelard absolute charge over her, even authorizing corporal punishment if she was lax in her studies. "If he had entrusted a tender lamb to a ravening wolf," Abelard writes, "it would not have surprised me more."[17]

Abelard was supremely confident of his own seductive powers: "At that time I had youth and exceptional good looks as well as my great reputation to recommend me, and feared no rebuff from any woman I might choose to honor with my love," particularly a woman so enamored of learning.[18] And so it proved. Their private study of letters led to murmured endearments and, with the books still open before them, to physical intimacy. Dante borrowed the scene and the mood for his Paolo and Francesca. "*Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante*," Francesca modestly explains. "That day we read no more."[19]

Abelard is more frank:

> Her studies allowed us to withdraw in private, as love desired, and then with our books open before us, more words of love than of our reading passed between us, and more kissing than teaching. My hands strayed oftener to her bosom than to the pages; love drew our eyes to look on each other more than reading kept them on our texts.... Our desires left no stage of lovemaking untried, and if love could devise something new, we welcomed it. We entered on each joy the more eagerly for our previous inexperience, and were the less easily sated.[20]

Abelard began to neglect his school and his studies after nights sleepless with lovemaking. He was also indiscreet, and the affair became an open secret known to all but the uncle. Abelard, who had a singular talent for composition and a beautiful singing voice, wrote a number of secular love songs to Heloise. He also brazenly inserted into his logical text such sentences as “Peter loves his girl,” analyzing their properties as he would the more standard “Socrates is a man.” Fulbert finally could no longer ignore the talk, and he separated the two lovers. But they continued to correspond and to meet in secret. Being kept apart simply inflamed their passion. They became reckless and were caught by Fulbert in the very act of lovemaking.

Soon thereafter, Heloise became pregnant. Abelard spirited her away from her uncle's house and sent her, disguised as a nun, to his sister's home in Brittany. In effect, Abelard admits, she was a hostage against her well-connected uncle's anger. There, she gave birth to a son whom she named Astrolabe (a partial anagram of *Petrus Abaelardus*, his father's Latin name, and also the name of an astronomical device used to track the planets and stars). In her absence, Abelard made peace, of a sort, with Fulbert by promising to marry Heloise. Abelard stipulated, however, that the marriage remain a secret so that he could continue in his position as master at the school of Notre-Dame and maintain his reputation as a philosopher and theologian.

Heloise protested vigorously against the marriage. She insisted that her uncle would not be appeased by the secret marriage and would continue to nurse his grudge against Abelard. More important, she argued that Abelard was not meant for marriage and that it would impair his standing with the church and as a philosopher. As Abelard puts its (in obvious agreement with Heloise), “Nature had created me for all mankind,” not to be bound to a single woman.[21] She cited to him the example of Socrates (whose wife's name, Xanthippe, became synonymous with “shrew”) and quoted from Cicero, Seneca, and Saint Augustine in an effort to convince him that a philosopher must remain unmarried. She would rather be a friend than a wife to him, she

insisted, and preferred to accept his love as freely given rather than compelled by marriage. Even if they had to live apart, their rare meetings would be all the sweeter.

In these arguments, Abelard ruefully admits, “she showed herself a true prophet.”[22] But Abelard insisted and Heloise finally acquiesced. They were married in a private ceremony attended by Fulbert and a few friends. They then parted, and their meetings were furtive and infrequent in order to conceal their marriage from others. Yet Fulbert immediately reneged on his promise, and he and his household began to tell others of the marriage. Heloise openly called Fulbert a liar and denied the marriage, inciting Fulbert's anger. Concerned for her safety (or perhaps finding a neat solution to the problem of a wife whom he was not prepared to treat fully as a wife), Abelard removed her to the convent at Argenteuil, where Heloise had been educated as a child. There, she wore the habit of a novice (one in training to be a nun) but not the veil. And Abelard continued to visit her, even making love to her in a darkened corner of the refectory.

But Fulbert concluded that Abelard was intent on repudiating the marriage by forcing Heloise to become a nun. His revenge was swift and brutal. One night, after bribing one of Abelard's servants to admit them, a group of Fulbert's kinsmen seized Abelard as he slept and castrated him. As Abelard later explained, “They cut off the parts of my body whereby I had committed the wrong of which they complained.”[23]

Two of his assailants, including the bribed servant, were captured (probably by retainers of Stephen de Garlande) and were themselves castrated and blinded. Fulbert was dismissed as canon of the Cathedral of Notre-Dame and his property was confiscated, but he was quietly reinstated after two years, a reflection perhaps both of family connections and the fact that castration (and blinding) was at the time an accepted form of punishment for many crimes. Abelard himself would later contend that the act of castration was God's way of humbling his pride and punishing his lust. At the time, however, he protested bitterly, if in vain, against the leniency shown to Fulbert.

News of the nighttime attack on its most famous scholar spread quickly throughout Paris. Abelard found the commiseration of his friends and students harder to bear than the ridicule of his enemies. “I suffered more from their sympathy,” he writes, “than from the pain of my wound, and felt the misery of my mutilation less than my shame and humiliation.”[24] Those feelings of shame and humiliation, rather than any devout conversion, led him to enter a monastery. He also pressed Heloise to take her vows as a nun. She did so, but with the greatest reluctance. She saw herself as the bride of Abelard, not of

Christ. Indeed, as she took the veil, she recited Cornelia's lament upon the defeat of Pompey from Lucan's *Pharsalia*:

> O noble husband,
> Too great for me to wed, was it my fate
> To bend that lofty head? What prompted me
> To marry you and bring about your fall?
> Now claim your due, and see me gladly pay…[25]

Although precise dating is not possible, all these events—the birth, the marriage, the castration, and the religious vows—probably took place in a single year, 1118.

Abelard, at least, quickly embraced his new role with all the brilliance, combativeness, and poor judgment he had previously shown. He succeeded in deeply offending the abbot and monks of his first monastery, Saint-Denis, by openly criticizing (with no apparent appreciation of the irony) the lax morals of its inhabitants. Even worse, he questioned the identity and history of the abbey's patron saint. His treatise on divine unity and trinity, *Theologia "Summi Boni,"* was condemned for heresy at Soissons in 1121, and he was forced to cast it into the fire with his own hands and to recite the Athanasian Creed, like a child, before the assembled bishops. His old enemies Alberic and Lotulf instigated the prosecution and, according to Abelard, succeeded through political manipulation and trickery rather than by showing that his account of the Trinity was doctrinally problematic.

Abelard was briefly confined at the abbey of Saint-Médard before returning to Saint-Denis. He quickly found his position there to be intolerable, but not because of his heresy. He was accused of treason because of his ill-considered claim that the legendary Saint Denis, a patron saint of France, was an amalgam of three different historical figures. By tradition (though he does not say this in his *Historia*), Abelard fled the abbey at night through the hole in the wall that served as a privy. He traveled to Troyes, where he received protection from the powerful Count Theobald. Through the intercession of his patron, Stephen de Garlande, Abelard eventually was allowed to establish a remote and modest hermitage in Troyes, which he provocatively dedicated to the Trinity and named the Paraclete, in honor of the grace of the Holy Spirit that provided him comfort in his refuge.

Once ensconced there, he immediately began rewriting and expanding his earlier book on the Trinity without changing the essentials of his argument. This book, the *Theologia Christiana*,

likewise would ultimately be condemned toward the end of Abelard's life. He also worked on *Sic et Non*, his collection of contradictions among the writings of the church fathers on various questions of Catholic doctrine. His purpose in doing so was not nihilistic but, rather, pluralistic. He wanted to show that the essentials of Christian faith could be approached through many angles and that no one formulation held a monopoly on the truth.

Inevitably, students again came to hear him. He started a school to support himself. “I was ‘not strong enough to dig and too proud to beg,’” he explains, quoting the Gospel of Luke.[26] Less modestly, he notes, “Though my person lay hidden in this place, my fame travelled all over the world.”[27]

Also inevitably, he stirred controversy and excited enmity. Evil reports were spread about his faith and his way of life. He grew paranoid, though perhaps not without reason. Whenever church members assembled for a council, he was concerned they had convened to condemn him.[28] He became so despondent that he actually considered moving to Muslim Spain, where he thought he might receive a more kindly welcome among the heathens than from his own brothers in Christ. In the end, though, he made an even worse choice, accepting a position as abbot at Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys, a monastery on the west coast of Brittany.

Abelard's desire to find peace merely augmented his troubles. He claims that the monks at Saint-Gildas were irretrievably dissolute. Some lived openly with their mistresses and children and stole what they could from the monastery for their support. His efforts at reform met with such fierce resentment that, he claims, they tried to poison his food and once even put poison in the chalice with which he said mass. He removed himself to a remote cell with a few companions, but when he traveled the other monks would hire robbers to attack him on the road and murder him. The stories he tells are fantastic and difficult to believe. Abelard indeed may have been suffering from paranoia by the time he came to write his *Historia*. Certainly, though, he had a practical reason to exaggerate, which was to justify his ultimate abandonment of Saint-Gildas.

The one bright spot in his life also required a justification. In 1129, Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis used forged papers to claim that the abbey at Argenteuil actually belonged to Saint-Denis. He expelled the nuns, citing their immoral behavior as a pretext. By then, Heloise was the prioress (a position just below the abbess), and a group of the nuns wished to remain with her. Whether at Heloise's behest or on his own initiative, Abelard offered them his hermitage, the Paraclete, as their own refuge. The deed of gift was approved by the local bishop and confirmed by the pope. Heloise, now the abbess, proved an adept

leader, making allies among important churchmen and soliciting donations from local landowners. The Paraclete, after a period of initial hardship, began to flourish. Abelard visited often to provide guidance and support, and he found among the nuns the “haven of peace and safety”[29] he had long sought.

It is unclear exactly where Abelard was living in 1133 when he wrote the *Historia*. He probably had left Saint-Gildas for good by then and was residing in Paris, a little more than one hundred miles from Troyes. He taught there until the Council of Sens in 1140. Abelard's abandonment of the monastery was a minor scandal. His repeated visits to the Paraclete also gave rise to malicious gossip that he was driven by lust and his desire to be with his former lover, Heloise. His *Historia* is an *apologia* (in the sense of justification) for both. Through the story of his misfortunes, he hopes not only to provide consolation to his ostensible brother in Christ, but also to make clear that he is a changed man. Through God's grace, he assures the reader, both his lust and his pride have been curbed, and he is now a devout servant of the Lord, a man, as Shakespeare's King Lear would later protest, “more sinned against than sinning.”[30]

Abelard concludes his *Historia* with a quote from Proverbs: “Whatever befalls the righteous man it shall not sadden him.”[31] The history of his calamities is not just an invitation to the reader to dismiss his own troubles as minor in comparison; it is also an example of how God's grace can work even through misfortune. In that respect, the *Historia* does warrant comparison with Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*. However obscure God's plan may be, it is all for the best. “Thy will be done,” Abelard intones, as he promises not to set his own will above that of God. It is a promise that will be sorely tested, for Abelard's misfortunes are far from over.

## HISTORY OF HER CALAMITIES

The portrait of Heloise contained in the *Historia* is dictated by Abelard's own agenda. He hopes to justify his current conduct by condemning his younger self. Accordingly, he focuses on his seduction of Heloise, not on her own feelings for him, much less their feelings for one another. He emphasizes the physical passion that drove his fall and that he has now transcended with the grace of God. The young Heloise is a one-dimensional figure of temptation in his private morality play.

Fortunately, Heloise has a voice of her own, and she gives us a very different, much fuller, and far more compelling perspective on their affair. Her passion is of a higher order than that described by Abelard. It is a passion for complete physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual union. For Heloise, their love was no sin but something to be celebrated and embraced. It was not a youthful folly but the high point of her life, and she will not slander it with false piety or impose upon it an artificial narrative of sin and salvation. She sees no incompatibility between her love of God and her love of Abelard. But, if forced to choose, she will remain faithful to the latter, and she was so throughout her life.

Heloise was raised at the convent at Argenteuil where she would later take her vows as a nun. She may have been illegitimate. Nothing is known of her father, and very little of her mother, except that she came from a noble family and that her brother Fulbert, who became Heloise's guardian and Abelard's nemesis, was a canon at Notre-Dame. Heloise was a remarkable student, learning Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, and was thoroughly conversant with the pagan philosophers and poets of classical Rome. By the time she encountered Abelard, probably in her early or midtwenties, she already was renowned for her learning and her elegant Latin prose. Although Abelard was the master and she the student, and although it is impossible to trace the exact lines of influence, it is not unreasonable to regard them as fellow scholars working together on issues of language, ethics, and theology.[32]

Heloise was likely in her early forties when Abelard wrote the *Historia*. She was by then the respected abbess of the Paraclete. How she obtained a copy of Abelard's memoir is unclear. She says it was "by chance."[33] Regardless, she read it with growing dismay, not only because of the account of her lover's continued misfortunes, but even more so for its falsification and betrayal of their relationship. She responded with a letter of her own, the salutation of which reads:

> To her lord, or rather father; to her husband, or rather brother; from his handmaid, or rather daughter; from his wife, or rather sister: to Abelard, from Heloise.[34]

There is both playfulness and sarcasm in this greeting, along with a strong undercurrent of sadness. She sees him still as her lord and husband, and herself as his handmaid and wife. But time and the church have assigned them different roles. The last salutation—to Abelard, from Heloise—is a plea to set aside such labels and relate to one another as individuals with a deep and rich history together. All three letters she writes have the same objective: to restore the personal intimacy (though not the physical passion) of their earlier

relationship; to force Abelard to see her and treat her as an individual, not as a sister in Christ.

She commiserates with "the cross of unending suffering which you, my only love, continue to bear."[35] She offers him the continued support and comfort of the sisters of the Paraclete and urges him to lighten his troubles by sharing them. But she also tells him frankly that he has given her "fresh wounds of grief as well as re-opening the old," and she urges him: "as you set about tending the wounds which others have dealt, heal the wounds you have yourself inflicted."[36] Indeed, she stresses, he owes her a debt that is all the greater for "the marriage sacrament uniting us"—a sacrament she had initially resisted precisely because it was so binding—and for "the love I have always borne you, as everyone knows, a love which is beyond all bounds."[37]

Fulbert's act of treachery did not just injure Abelard; it robbed Heloise of her very self by robbing her of Abelard. Yet Abelard compounded that loss and her sorrow by commanding her to become a nun. He commanded her to destroy herself, and her love had reached such heights of madness that she obeyed, giving up all hope of recovering what she most desired simply to prove him, she explains, "the sole possessor of my body and my will alike."[38]

Her love for Abelard was untainted by any demands of her own. "I never sought anything in you except yourself," she writes; "I wanted simply you, nothing of yours."[39] She did not seek marriage, preferring the word "friend" or even "concubine" to that of "wife" for fear of damaging his reputation and hindering his scholarly career. "God is my witness that if Augustus, Emperor of the whole world, thought fit to honour me with marriage and conferred all the earth on me to possess for ever, it would be dearer and more honourable to me to be called not his Empress [*imperatrix*] but your whore [*meretrix*]."[40]

Heloise rhapsodizes on the Abelard of her first acquaintance. He was already famous as a philosopher and adorned with every grace of mind and body. Yet two things in particular drew every woman to him: his gift of composing and his gift of singing. His beautiful melodies were learned even by those who knew no Latin. And the songs he wrote about their love made her almost as widely known as he. "Every wife, every young girl desired you in absence and was on fire in your presence," she claims. "Queens and great ladies envied me my joys and my bed."[41]

Heloise acknowledges that she was "wholly guilty" in her actions; yet she insists that she was "wholly innocent" in her intentions.[42] She enjoyed the pleasures of the flesh with Abelard but acted solely from love. Now she is forced to question whether the same can be said of him, given his long neglect of her, without a word or letter of consolation since she entered religious life. Everyone naturally

believes that he was driven by lust rather than love, and she finds it hard to dispute them even in her own mind: “I wish I could think of some explanation which would excuse you and somehow cover up the way you hold me cheap.”[43]

She deserves and expects no reward from God for the austerities of the cloister. She took her vows not through any vocation of her own but solely at Abelard's insistence, in grief and shame that he trusted her so little as to fear she might be tempted by another man. After fifteen years of denying herself every pleasure, she hopes that she has finally proved that she is his alone. She asks nothing in return but an occasional word of comfort that will restore his presence to her in the only way he can. When they were young and he desired her for sinful pleasures, the letters and songs came thick and fast. Now, at least, he can write to give her the strength to serve God. “I beg you,” she concludes, “think what you owe me, give ear to my pleas, and I will finish a long letter with a brief ending: farewell, my only love.”[44]

With calculated obtuseness, Abelard responds to this achingly beautiful, heartfelt letter with the most banal of excuses. He sent her no words of comfort, he insists, because he believed she needed none. He had assumed that “my sister once dear in the world and now dearest in Christ” was content in her convent and had happily devoted herself to God.[45] If she desires religious instruction, she may ask him for whatever she needs. But he will not engage with her on a personal level and insists that, given his current troubles, he needs her prayers more than she needs his. “Be mindful of me,” he lamely concludes.[46]

Heloise's second letter is a *cri de coeur*: “Of all wretched women I am the most wretched, and amongst the unhappy I am unhappiest.”[47] The height of their prior joy marks the measure of her current grief. The irony that it was lawful marriage, rather than their earlier fornication, that brought disaster upon them further fuels her outrage at God. She will not accept Abelard's view that his castration was a just punishment. She does see her own misery as a form of penance for the ruin she brought upon him. But she makes her amends to Abelard, not to God, whom she still accuses of the “greatest cruelty.”[48] Indeed, she can make no amends to God because she cannot regret or cast aside her former desires. Even after fifteen years as a nun, she admits with remarkable frankness:

> The pleasures of lovers which we shared have been too sweet—they cannot displease me, and can scarcely shift from my memory. Wherever I turn they are always there before my eyes, bringing with them awakened longings and fantasies which will not even let me sleep. Even during the celebration of the Mass, when our prayers should be purer, lewd visions of those pleasures take such a hold upon my unhappy soul that my thoughts are on their wantonness instead of on prayers. *I should be groaning over the*

*sins I have committed, but I can only sigh for what I have lost.* Everything we did and also the times and places where we did it are stamped on my heart along with your image, so that I live through them all again with you. Even in sleep I know no respite.[49]

She confesses that she is a hypocrite, insofar as the world now sees her as chaste and devout. Yet, she adds, "there is little in religion which is not hypocrisy."[50] She deserves no praise from God, and she wants none from Abelard. She has acted throughout for love of Abelard alone.

This second letter of Heloise is the last she would write to Abelard in a personal vein. For he responded to her as a stern confessor and teacher, chastising her "old perpetual complaint against God."[51] Turn your mind to God, he counsels, and "cease from complaints like these which are so far removed from the true depths of love!"[52] If she cuts herself off from God, she will cut herself off from him as well. Their prior sins were due to lust, he insists, and his castration was an act of grace for them both. She is now the bride of Christ, not the bride of Abelard: "in Christ fare well and live in Christ."[53]

Heloise acquiesces. She remains unchanged in her personal love for Abelard. That is clear from the salutation of her third and final letter: "To him who is specially hers, she who is singularly his."[54] But she will obey his wishes and suppress all trace of her feelings and her sorrow from her letter. "Would that a grieving heart would be as ready to obey as a writer's hand," she adds.[55]

Thus begins what is commonly known as the silence of Heloise, and we as readers are the poorer for it. She does not write to him again—at least not in a letter we possess. But, rather than hear nothing from Abelard, Heloise in her last letter solicits his views on the proper place of women in Christianity and asks him to prescribe a Rule for the Paraclete, given that the Rule of Saint Benedict for monks is not suitable for nuns. Even here, we see a bit of her mischief and her humor show through, as she asks how women can be concerned with the prescribed cowls, drawers, and scapulars of the monk, or how they can wear woolen garments next to their skin "when the monthly purging of their superfluous humours must avoid such things?"[56] She also asks, perhaps to ignite a spark of jealousy, whether an abbess may properly give hospitality to visiting men and eat with them at table, "where gluttony and drunkenness are rife, and wine which leads to lechery is drunk with enjoyment."[57]

Abelard responds with two pedantic, interminable letters. Yet they are of interest for two reasons. First, at a time of growing misogyny

(not inconsistent with the growth of secular poems of courtly love), Abelard shows himself a confirmed believer in the abilities of women and their importance in the church. Second, Abelard acknowledges the impossibility of a perfect religious life and the need for moderation in the rule of both convents and monasteries. Ideal communities must give way to communities that account for human weaknesses and the shortcomings of human understanding. This latter point clearly shows Heloise's influence, and it is a common theme throughout Abelard's writings on logic, theology, and ethics, to which we now turn.

## LOGIC

Logic was the jewel in the crown of medieval education. It was a tool for the precise use of words and, hence, for understanding in any discipline. It was also a sword to deploy in engagements between scholars. Dialectical disputes were a spectator sport among students, and Abelard was the acknowledged champion.

Aristotle's works on logic were only partially known to Latin readers, through the commentaries of Porphyry and Boethius. But they were endlessly dissected and extended, and by no one more brilliantly and creatively than Abelard. He viewed logic not just as a set of rules for deductive and inductive reasoning, but also as a pathway to understanding language and the relationship between language and thought, on the one side, and between language and the world, on the other. His philosophy of language—and it is not too much of a stretch to view Abelard as the father of that discipline—in turn influenced his ethics and his theology.

Abelard approached language through the problem of universals. Proper names (“Abelard,” “Heloise”) signify individuals. Universals (“man,” “woman,” “white,” “courage,” etc.) can be used to say something about numerous individuals. They are shared in common. But what do universals signify? How do they get their meaning? Platonic realism suggests that universals are names as well. They are names for specific forms or ideas, and universals can be predicated of individuals insofar as they partake of those forms. The forms are metaphysical entities that are immaterial and unchanging.

Abelard, following and significantly extending what he knew of Aristotle, took a different position, known as nominalism. Only particular things exist in the world. A universal is a word (*vox*), not a thing (*res*).[58] Universals are not just sounds, however. Human

convention has turned those sounds into words with meaning. We abstract from the particular features of the individuals in favor of a common feature, a “nondifference” between individuals. Universals are words that we overlay upon the world to capture those “nondifferences,” to help us discern and articulate the features of individuals. Their meaning is determined by their use in our language. This is a point with which Ludwig Wittgenstein (who, unfortunately, seems never to have read Abelard) revolutionized philosophy in the twentieth century, eight hundred years after Abelard.[59] Language both reflects and creates our awareness of the characteristics of things. Language does not attach to reality like names attach to things, but rather is a loose and imprecise grid we impose upon the world of things. It is a convention that reflects our own needs and concerns. Augustine, whom Wittgenstein did read with the greatest care and admiration, made a similar point: language arises to describe human wants, desires, and needs, and as such it is ill-tuned to address the spiritual realm.

Language, then, is a product of human invention, not categorical dictation. This is a point that Wittgenstein would call the “autonomy of grammar,” and although Abelard does not relentlessly pursue all its implications, he does anticipate it in startling ways. Yet Abelard, for all his nominalism, is still a Platonist at heart. Abelard believes that, when God created the world, he created natural kinds or types of substances. There is thus a metaphysical, Platonic substructure to all that exists. But that metaphysical substructure created by God is beyond the grasp of man. God may have created the world, but man created language. Accordingly, there is a significant gap between our language and this underlying structure of reality. Abelard does not so much reject Platonic realism as he, like Augustine, rejects the idea that our language captures or can capture such a higher reality. Our human language is determined by use, not by any Platonic forms in the mind of God.

As John Marenbon, the premier expositor of Abelard's philosophy, explains, Abelard “draws a subtle distinction between what universal words would mean, if we had a perfect and complete view of the nature of things, and what they do mean” given that we have not fully “grasped or distinguished this nature or these properties.”[60] This lack of a transparent correspondence does not prevent language from meeting our everyday needs, but it does, Eileen Sweeney notes, “need to be recognized as a condition within which we live, speak, and understand.”[61]

## THEOLOGY

Abelard thought the gap between our language and what exists widens when we speak about God. Even as our language aspires to some sort of connection with the divine, it inevitably falls short. We are always circling the ungraspable. We cannot reach God's truth by any direct route; but we can flee falsehood and hypocrisy, and we thereby reach a fuller understanding of our faith.

Abelard was one of the first thinkers to use the term *theology* to signal his attempt to merge scriptural authority and human reason. Christians must be logicians, he thought, for only logic makes sense of language.[62] It is not possible perfectly to comprehend or illuminate the divine, a point Augustine had constantly emphasized.[63] Doubt and inquiry are therefore critical features of the striving for religious understanding, which is always and necessarily imperfect. Yet we can approach truth by frankly acknowledging the inherent elusiveness of meaning.[64] We can gain faith through doubt.

That was the point of Abelard's *Sic et Non*. He displayed the contradictions among the writings of the church fathers not to suggest they were wrong but rather to emphasize that it is possible to understand scriptural revelations in different ways and through different formulations. The church fathers were not infallible; they, too, were humans using an imperfect language to circle the ungraspable. There is no one correct interpretation of a text but rather multiple possible readings. The scriptures are sacred, but what they mean is open to discussion, and the application of logic can aid in that discussion. The same principle applies to church doctrines, which must constantly be tested in the crucible of reason as well as faith.

Abelard noted that his theology students “demanded something intelligible rather than mere words.”[65] He used standard philosophical arguments to clarify religious doctrines under the theory that “nothing could be believed unless it was first understood,”[66] a reversal of the traditional church view that there is no understanding without faith. For Abelard, probing and questioning are themselves pious acts. Abelard wanted to provoke his students into inquiry. They must confront honestly the contrary formulations of faith. They must question everything, investigate everything, and challenge everything and everyone by putting them to the test of logic and reason. They must take responsibility for their own resolution of disputed issues. They must take the words and the commands of faith and infuse them with new life and new understanding. They will inevitably fall short, but: “*Haec quippe prima sapientiae clavis definitur assidua scilicet seu*

*frequens interrogatio*" ("The first key to wisdom is continuous and frequent questioning.").[67]

A century after Abelard, scholasticism (the application of dialectical reasoning to religion) would reach its apotheosis in the writings of Thomas Aquinas. But, in twelfth-century France, it was still a dangerous undertaking and inevitably led Abelard into trouble. Already chastised once for heresy at Soissons in 1121, Abelard would face trial again in 1140. This time his principal antagonist was Bernard, the powerful Cistercian abbot of Clairvaux. Bernard did not approve of Abelard's attempt to use reason and logic to dissect and analyze religious doctrines. The mysteries of religion, he believed, are not subject to rational scrutiny. They call for faith. Have faith and you will understand, Bernard taught. As for Abelard, Bernard wrote, "He prefers the inventions of the philosophers and his own novelties to the doctrine and faith of the Catholic fathers."[68] Bernard also added a more personal and telling jibe: "there is nothing he does not know about in heaven or earth, except his own self."[69] Bernard drew up a list of nineteen heresies he contended were contained in Abelard's writings, but they boiled down to two essential points: Abelard had misconstrued the nature of the Trinity and the meaning of the incarnation of Christ.

Abelard's early writing on the Trinity had gotten him into trouble at Soissons. His mature and more developed views fared no better. In keeping with his theory of universals, he contends that "God the Father," "God the Son," and "God the Holy Spirit" are words that express the power, wisdom, and goodness of God. They do not refer to separate substances or individuals. Rather, they are attributes—ways of describing God and the aspects of his perfection. Abelard adds, moreover, that it does not require Christian doctrine to arrive at these three attributes of the highest and most perfect being. Thus, in explicating his views on the Trinity, Abelard relies on pagan philosophers, particularly Plato's *Timaeus* and his doctrine of the world soul, the spiritual substance that underlies all created things. The true philosopher, Abelard contends, knows what Christianity teaches through reason alone, as opposed to divine or scriptural revelation.

The humorless Bernard, in a rare flash of wit, accused Abelard of "sweating to make Plato a Christian."[70] Yet Abelard was simply following in the tradition of both Augustine and Boethius in finding religious wisdom in secular philosophy. More seriously, however, Bernard accused Abelard of essentially denying the existence of the Trinity as three separate persons in one God and also of reserving all power to God the Father, rather than extending that power to Christ and to the Holy Spirit. But, in Abelard's view, even God the Father is

not all-powerful, because God cannot do other than act in accordance with absolute goodness, an understanding of which (although not a complete understanding) is available to us through reason and has been available since even before Christ.[71]

The second point is related to the first. Abelard believes there were Christians before Christ. It follows that Christ was not necessary to their salvation or to our own. Abelard does not really believe in original sin, as opposed to our inherent weakness and disposition to sin, because it would be inconsistent with God's absolute goodness to punish us for a sin committed by Adam. Sin cannot be innate, passed from parent to child. As a result, Abelard does not believe that Christ had to die for our sins. Rather, Abelard celebrates the example of wisdom and love provided by the incarnate Christ as a means to salvation that we might not reach on our own. This allows him to argue, contrary to established Christian doctrine, that pagans, too, can be saved if they are sufficiently virtuous. Indeed, Abelard holds up the pagan philosophers as examples of Christian virtue to which nominal Christians, including the many monks of Abelard's acquaintance, so often fall short.

Bernard published his criticisms of Abelard in a widely circulated public letter. He even went to Paris to warn students to stay away from Abelard. Abelard, in a characteristic misjudgment, asked the archbishop of Sens, host of an upcoming church council, to require Bernard either to withdraw his accusations or to attend the council and justify himself. Bernard was far more adept at church politics than Abelard, and he lined up support in the council before the unsuspecting Abelard even arrived. Moreover, recent political changes were unfavorable to Abelard. King Louis VI had died on August 1, 1137. Louis VII, who was only seventeen when he ascended to the throne, was under the influence of Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, a longtime antagonist of Abelard. And Stephen de Garlande, Abelard's longtime patron, had fallen from favor and had been forced to retire.

The Council of Sens was attended by Louis VII and seven bishops. When it quickly became clear that Abelard had no chance to prevail, he exercised his right to appeal directly to the pope and withdrew. It was a clever move except for the fact that Pope Innocent II owed his own survival in a church schism to the efforts of Bernard and was more than happy to do Bernard's bidding. Abelard made plans to journey to Rome but got only as far as the monastery at Cluny. Bernard forestalled him with an urgent letter to the pope urging Abelard's condemnation. The pope quickly obliged. He condemned Abelard's “perverse” doctrines as heresy, excommunicated him and his followers, imposed upon him a decree of “perpetual silence,” and ordered that he be confined to a religious house and that his books be

burned.

Peter the Venerable, the abbot of Cluny, gave the aging and now ill Abelard refuge. He urged Bernard to reconcile with Abelard and the pope to rescind (at least in part) his condemnation. His efforts were successful, largely because there was a backlash against Bernard for his machinations, and Bernard himself realized that he might have pressed matters too far. The sentence of excommunication was lifted. Abelard removed or modified offending passages in his *Theologia Christiana* and agreed to teach no longer in Paris (a moot point given his illness and imminent death). In return, Bernard left him alone.

A chastened Abelard sent his confession of faith to Heloise, in which he wrote, “I do not wish to be a philosopher if it means conflicting with Paul, nor to be an Aristotle if it cuts me off from Christ.”[72] Yet Abelard did not retreat from his views, which he insisted were misunderstood and distorted by his detractors. “The storm may rage,” he concluded, “but I am unshaken, though the winds may blow they leave me unmoved; for the rock of my foundation stands firm.”[73]

## ETHICS

Abelard called moral philosophy “the aim of all the disciplines,” to which all the rest are “mere preliminaries.”[74] This is a startling statement for a medieval Christian, since it appears to place ethics above theology. It recalls the famous question in Plato's *Euthyphro*: Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because the gods love it?[75] In the course of the dialogue, Socrates forces Euthyphro to admit, contrary to his initial impulse, that the gods love piety because it is pious; an act is not pious because the gods love it. Describing an incidental affect or quality of piety (that it is loved by the gods) does not capture the essential nature of piety. Plato thus establishes the primacy of philosophical inquiry over revealed religion. It is the job of the philosopher, through the application of reason, to determine what is pious, right, and just.

Abelard, too, relies on reason rather than revelation. He therefore approaches theology through philosophical ethics, though in his case the two are inextricably bound together. Ethics is the search for the highest good, and the highest good as determined by philosophy is God. God is the embodiment of perfect goodness. Accordingly, in his work on ethics, Abelard starts with a philosophical account (drawn from Plato) of the goodness of God and his ordering of the universe,

and he descends from there to practical ethics. He adopts the view, common to Augustine and Boethius, that everything is arranged for the best by providence and that divine goodness rules over all. But Abelard does not attempt to bridge the gap between human suffering, particularly the suffering of good people, and the divine plan. The workings of providence are opaque to us. There is an inevitable gap between our understanding and divine providence, just as there is an inevitable gap between our language and the world we attempt to describe.

Abelard nonetheless argues that even God is bound by ethics. Since God's essential nature is goodness, God cannot act otherwise than out of his goodness. His goodness is a limitation on his power. God, therefore, is not omnipotent because God cannot do evil; he cannot act contrary to his own essential nature. Abelard does not believe we can grasp the essential nature of God's goodness. The divine is too remote from us, and our language is too blunt and imperfect a tool. Yet Abelard believes we can make the effort—however flawed—to take God's goodness as our own model.

Making the transition to practical ethics, Abelard argues that the moral quality of our actions depends upon our intention to do just that: to take God's goodness as our own model. Actions themselves are indifferent. The same action can be moral or immoral depending on the intention behind it.[76] For Abelard, any individual act is good only insofar as it is performed out of love for God and in attempted imitation of the goodness of God toward all persons. The only thing that is good is the good will, for there is an inevitable gap between intention and action.[77] Only God can perceive fully the intentions that lie behind our actions.[78]

Christ has set for us an example of perfect love for God and our fellows that we can attempt to apply to our own lives. At this point in his argument, Abelard looks to revelation to supplement, but not to displace, reason. We can accept the mystery of the incarnation of Christ only through revelation, and faith in that incarnation is crucial to our salvation. Man's natural love of God—accessible to reason—is augmented by such faith. Abelard accordingly believes that the incarnation of God's love in Christ should be the defining feature of Christianity, not the rituals and sacraments taking on increasing importance in the church. Just as Abelard stresses the intention over the deed, he stresses inner spirituality over outward observance. Religious customs and practices should both reflect and promote that inner spirituality. Too much focus on the former can impoverish the latter. Practices can become fetishes if not constantly refreshed by and grounded in spirituality. The intention—the underlying love of God—is paramount.

Even church doctrines must take second place to the love of God. In his famous dialogues between a philosopher, a Christian, and a Jew, Abelard largely takes the side of the philosopher. The philosopher demonstrates that all three share a common understanding of the divine as powerful, beneficent, and wise. That common understanding in turn gives rise to a natural law that governs the moral life of Jews, Christians, and virtuous pagans alike. The positive law (sacraments, regulations, observances) imposed upon natural law by distinct religions are decidedly secondary. Indeed, the philosopher considers the sacraments, regulations, and other observances peculiar to individual religions to be so much "craziness"; a product of upbringing, not reason, that deliberately divides one community from another, as the various religions proclaim that "they alone are blessed" and condemn all the others.[79] All that is necessary for an authentic (albeit necessarily imperfect) moral and religious life —regardless of doctrinal niceties or positive law—is to act out of love of God and one's neighbor, which of course was Christ's point in the gospels. And the one doctrinal point upon which Abelard insists—Christ's incarnation—is not so much a redefining of the moral task accessible to reason as it is an example of morality's perfect fulfillment.

## LOVE

For all his brilliance, Abelard's influence on the history of thought has been limited. Within fifty years of Abelard's death, additional writings of Aristotle had become available in Latin translations, overwhelming any interest in Abelard's own work on logic. In the following century, Aquinas became the embodiment and the end point of scholastic philosophy, further eclipsing Abelard. Even on language and ethics, where he showed the most originality, Abelard anticipated rather than influenced modern theories. It is only because of his love affair with Heloise that Abelard is still read by more than a handful of scholars.

Yet, by the time they exchanged their justly famous letters, Abelard's devotion to God appears to have drained the life from his love for Heloise. He wants them to have an eternal union in beatitude with Christ, even if it means a separation, both physical and emotional, in this life. We must act out of love of God, he urges, and cannot put anything before that love. Using terms from his theory of language, we might say that Abelard regards Heloise as a universal (a sister in Christ), whereas she still demands to be seen as a particular

individual woman. Heloise admits no inconsistency between an abstract love of God and the more immediate, intimate love of another person. In retrospect, Abelard views their affair as sordid and unethical. He finds that easier on his conscience than admitting it once mattered or still matters to him. By contrast, Heloise believes, in keeping with the moral philosophy they developed together, that, because their spirits were pure, their deeds cannot be condemned.

We read the correspondence today not just for the historical and prurient interest of the *Historia*; we read it because the first two letters of Heloise, written more than fifteen years after the end of their physical relationship, articulate a vision of human love that has never been surpassed in its candor, beauty, and completeness; a love that connects two people spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and physically. She considers the erotic component of their love neither a sin nor a distraction, but instead a celebration and a reinforcement of their spiritual and emotional ties. In her view, even the castration of Abelard should not have severed those ties. The third letter of Heloise, in which she announces her silence in submission to Abelard's wishes, is heartbreaking in its simplicity, nobility, and suppressed sorrow. Her silence is our loss.

When Abelard and Heloise wrote their letters, Latin was still the medium of written expression. It was, for them, a living language. In another century, it would be a museum artifact. But the vernacular poetry of courtly love and romance that followed Abelard and Heloise, and that we associate so closely with the High Middle Ages, bore their influence. Chrétien de Troyes, who created the Arthurian romance, had a copy of the letters in his library. Jean de Meun, coauthor of the *Romance of the Rose*, an allegorical poem about courtly love, published the letters in a French translation in the 1270s. The fourteenth-century poet and humanist Petrarch also owned a set of the letters, though he conspicuously failed to acknowledge their influence, presumably because it was inconsistent with his narrative that the Middle Ages was a cultural wasteland and that the Renaissance of classical learning began with him.

In 1471, a monk named Johannes de Vepria, rummaging through the cupboards of the abbey of Clairvaux, came across another set of letters in Latin between an unidentified man and his unidentified lover. It appears from the undated letters that the man was her teacher and a famous scholar as well as a poet. The young woman was highly educated and a master of Latin prose. The monk copied significant portions of the manuscript for an anthology of Latin letters from Christian antiquity he was preparing. The monk's manuscript in turn was edited and published by a doctoral student, Ewald Könsgen, in 1974, with the intriguing title, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise?*

Constant Mews, a well-known authority on the period, has dropped the question mark and published the letters in an English translation as *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard*. He claims, based on substantial but far from conclusive evidence, that these were the letters referred to by Heloise in her response to the *Historia*: “When in the past you sought me out for sinful pleasures your letters came to me thick and fast.”[80]

The young lovers wrote to one another on wax tablets, which were erased after being read. But Mews suggests that Heloise made a fair copy of each of the letters back and forth and preserved that manuscript in the library at the Paraclete until it somehow found its way to Clairvaux. If so, these real-time letters paint a far more volatile picture of the affair than the brief, summary account in the *Historia* or the idealized recollections of Heloise. They reflect all the frustrations, misunderstandings, and reproaches one would expect during a youthful affair, as well as the underlying passion and the many obstacles that passion had to overcome. Indeed, the young woman's final letter to the man signals a separation:

> Where there is passion and love, there always rages effort. Now I am tired, I cannot reply to you, because you are taking sweet things as burdensome, and in doing so you sadden my spirit. Farewell.[81]

Perhaps, as Mews suggests, this sweet thing he takes as burdensome is Heloise's pregnancy, which set in motion the disastrous events that entombed them both in religious orders. Certainly, there are continuities with the later letters that shine through the somewhat-formulaic prose and often-pedestrian content of the earlier letters. But whether these continuities are due simply to the universal nature of young love or whether the letters really are the lost correspondence of Abelard and Heloise is unclear and perhaps, to all but scholars, unimportant. At a minimum, the early letters do nothing to detract from the mature expression of love contained in the later ones.

Abelard died on April 21, 1142, less than two years after his condemnation at Sens. His body was returned to Heloise and buried at the Paraclete. Heloise herself lived on for twenty-two more years before, per her stipulation, she was finally buried at his side. Medieval legend has it that the remains of Abelard reached out to embrace his bride and hold her to him in death as he could not in life. The famous lovers were moved to the Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris in 1817, where they remain to this day under a Gothic-style monument that has long been a pilgrimage site for couples and is often strewn with fresh flowers.

Alexander Pope, the eighteenth-century British poet known more for satire than for romanticism, captured the intense joy and even more intense sorrow of Heloise in his “Eloisa to Abelard”:

> May one kind grave unite each hapless name,
> And graft my love immortal on thy fame!
> Then, ages hence, when all my woes are o’er,
> When this rebellious heart shall beat no more;
> If ever chance two wandering lovers brings
> To Paraclete's white walls and silver springs,
> O'er the pale marble shall they join their heads,
> And drink the falling tears each other sheds;
> Then sadly say, with mutual pity moved,
> “Oh may we never love as these have loved!”[82]

# Chapter 6

# FROM EPIC TO ROMANCE

## The *Song of Roland* and the Arthurian Adventures of Chrétien de Troyes

As of 1100, most formal writing in western Europe was still in Latin. This is not surprising, since most education took place in Latin at schools associated with cathedrals and monasteries. Scholarly and religious treatises were in Latin. Abelard and Heloise wrote their famous letters in Latin. The love songs of the *Carmina Burana*, inspired by Ovid, were in Latin. Latin was, quite simply, the medium of sophisticated expression.

Yet, by the end of the twelfth century, vernacular literature was thriving. People began to write and read (or listen) in the language they spoke every day, as they had done in England since Alfred the Great. This was a development, in its time, every bit as transformative as the Internet has been in ours. Latin remained the preserve of the church and of scholars, but creative energy exploded as writers discovered the newfound freedom and the receptive audience—among the aristocracy and the growing middle class—outside that preserve.

The earliest vernacular writings tended to be religious treatises and translations or adaptations of Latin classics, such as Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Art of Love*. But three other genres quickly developed. The first were love poems, modeled on Ovid, sung by troubadours. The songs were written in what we now call Old French, and they celebrated *fin'amors*, refined or noble love, often more as an artifice than a genuine passion. The troubadour tradition began in Aquitaine

but quickly spread to Italy and Christian Spain and, later, to Germany and Portugal.

The second vernacular genre was the *chanson de geste*, or song of (heroic) deeds. These epic poems initially were written about the court of Charlemagne, king of the Franks and the Holy Roman emperor, who lived from 742 to 814. Subsequent songs celebrated more contemporary heroes. Almost one hundred *chansons de geste* survive in one form or another. They were sung or chanted by wandering singer-poets known as *jongleurs*, who accompanied their dramatic performances with a stringed, viola-like instrument known as a *vielle*. The most powerful, polished, and justly famous of these epics is the *Chanson de Roland* (*Song of Roland*). It is "by general consent the first masterpiece of French vernacular literature."[1]

The third vernacular genre is the *roman d'aventure*, or romance of adventure. The word *roman* originally signified merely that the story was written in Old French, a romance language derived from Latin. But the term quickly took on the more modern connotation of a romance because the most significant examples of these *romans* were stories of courtly love and knightly prowess. The *romans d'aventure* were mostly projected upon the legendary court of King Arthur in Britain in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. Chrétien de Troyes almost single-handedly established, perfected, and then transcended the genre.

The transition from the *chanson de geste* to the *roman d'aventure*, from epic to romance, is among the most significant developments in the history of thought. The epic hero's character is revealed wholly in his words and his deeds. He is a legendary, almost mythic figure presented against the backdrop of history. There is no internal analysis of the hero, no dissection of his consciousness separate from the actions he performs, the words he speaks, and the choices he makes. His deeds are sung in stately, formal verse, and his life unfolds on a plane far above the everyday world of the audience. The singer's recitation was likely delivered to an entire court and spread over several evenings.

The romance, by contrast, is much more intimate. The initial romances were composed in eight-syllable rhyming couplets designed to reflect the fluidity and flexibility of ordinary speech. Later romances were written in prose. Romances were meant to be read privately or, if aloud, only in small groups. Romances were not intended for formal performance, and the narrator took over from the *jongleur* in establishing a direct connection with the reader.

Romances are more self-consciously fabulist than epics. The heroes of romance are fictional creations superimposed upon the legendary realm of King Arthur. They show great courage and prowess

as knights-errant. But they also are devotees of courtly love, which has its own code. The demands of knighthood and those of love are frequently at odds, and the romances of Chrétien de Troyes explore this conflict both on a societal level and on a personal level. Because his characters must grapple with such tensions, their interior lives become richer and vastly more complicated. Out of these romances will ultimately grow the novel, which is what the French word *roman* now means, and with it the whole exploration of human emotions and human psychology that has shaped modern consciousness. In Chrétien's hands, the *roman d'aventure* became both the impetus toward, and the repository of, a profoundly enhanced interior life.

## THE *SONG OF ROLAND*

In August 778, Charlemagne entered Muslim-controlled Spain at the behest of one Muslim faction fighting against another. His would-be ally proved unreliable, however, and after a few months Charlemagne left to deal with a Saxon rebellion to the north. When crossing the Pyrenees back into France, his baggage train was attacked and pillaged by a group of Basques who had previously promised allegiance. The entire rear guard was slaughtered, including one of Charlemagne's vassals by the name of Roland. The attack took place in a remote pass called Rencesvals (in modern French, Roncevaux). Charlemagne's later excursions into Spain were more successful, and he eventually succeeded in establishing a Christian buffer zone there.

Such is the historical basis of the most famous and powerful of all the *chansons de geste*—the *Song of Roland*. The slaughter of the rear guard was sung about through the centuries by many poets, who altered, expanded and, at some point, radically changed the original material. Sometime near the end of the eleventh century, about the time the First Crusade was beginning, a poet of genius took this long oral tradition and created the poem we now possess, much as Homer did with the *Iliad*. The surviving manuscript dates from the mid-twelfth century. Its last line reads, "Here ends the story which Turoldus relates."[2] But whether Turoldus is the name of the poet or simply a scribe who copied the manuscript half a century later is unknown.

The *Song of Roland* departs significantly from its historical antecedents. In it, Charlemagne enters Spain on a crusade of his own, to advance the cause of Christianity against the Muslims (who are called Saracens and pagans in the poem). It is the Saracens who, after

suing for peace and promising to convert, treacherously attack the rear guard as Charlemagne is returning to France. The author retains the slaughter of the rear guard at the pass at Rencesvals, but its meaning is absorbed into and transfigured by the larger battle of Christianity against Islam.

Yet it is the character of Roland, nephew and favorite of the emperor, who dominates the poem. He has been variously described by later critics as the ideal pagan vassal in the Germanic warrior tradition of *Beowulf*; as a Christian saint or even Christ-figure who, by his death, ensures the triumph of Christianity over Islam; and as a classical tragic hero, whose hubris leads to the destruction of himself and twenty thousand of Charlemagne's finest knights. It is part of the brilliance of the poem that one could, and scholars still do, argue plausibly for each of the three readings.

The poem is composed in flexible units of verse or stanzas (known as *laisses*). Each *laisse* has its own coherence, its own center, as it recounts a particular incident: a critical speech, a display of emotion, the striking of a fatal blow. Yet the *laisses* are connected to one another through significant repetition. The isolation of each *laisse* gives the poem a staccato, scene-by-scene quality, while the repetition builds suspense and adds power to the dramatic action, thus sustaining the emotional intensity as well as providing formulaic elements that must greatly have aided oral performance. The result is ideally suited to the mythic plane upon which the legend of Roland unfolds, a “world of timeless heroes” that admits “nothing that is not extraordinary or monumental.”[3]

## THE TREACHERY OF GANELON

The poem starts *in media res* (in the middle of things), as Aristotle indicated both tragedy and epic poetry should do. After seven long years of war, only the mountain fortress of Saragossa, ruled by the Saracen king Marsile, remains unconquered. But that redoubt, too, the poet assures us, will fall to Charlemagne. The Saracens cannot defeat the French army. They cannot hope to win. Instead, they seek, through deceit, to take advantage of the perceived war-weariness of the Franks. Seven years is a long time for the knights to remain in the field, far from their homes and families.

Blancandrin, one of Marsile's vassals, urges the king to pledge faithful service to Charlemagne, to send him magnificent gifts, including four hundred mules laden with gold and silver, and to

promise to follow him to France in a few months, at Michaelmas, in order to receive the Christian faith:

> If he asks for hostages, send him some,
> Either ten or twenty, as a mark of good faith.
> Let us send him the sons of our wives;
> Even if it means his death, I shall send him mine.
> …
>
> Far better for them to lose their heads there
> Than for us to lose the fair and beautiful land of Spain.[4]

Once Charlemagne returns to France, Blancandrin predicts, the Frankish army will disband, each man to his home. Michaelmas will arrive, and Charlemagne will hear no word or news from King Marsile. The hostages will be beheaded, but the Frankish army will not be reconstituted and the Saracens will escape conquest and forced conversion.

It is worth noting that the poet has nothing but praise for Blancandrin. He calls him “one of the wisest of the pagans, / A most valiant and worthy knight” and “a man of great worth.”[5] The Saracens worship a false god and are not to be trusted. But they are brave and worthy adversaries. Their nobility as warriors will only enhance the nobility of Roland and the doomed rear guard.

When Blancandrin brings olive branches and Marsile's false promises of conversion to Charlemagne's camp, the emperor is cautious. The deception is carefully calculated to appeal to Charlemagne's overriding objective to convert the Saracens and make Spain a Christian country. But Charlemagne “was not a man for hasty words. / His habit is to speak at leisure.”[6] After hearing the offer of hostages as a pledge of good faith, Charlemagne consults with his barons. He is dependent on their loyalty and their willingness to remain in the field. “He wishes to be guided entirely by the men of France.”[7]

Count Roland, as the emperor's mightiest warrior, speaks first. He is adamant that the offer should be refused, reminding Charlemagne and the assembled barons that King Marsile made the same proposal before, only to behead the two messengers, Basan and Basile, whom Charlemagne sent in response. Roland calls for unrelenting war to finish the conquest of Spain and to “avenge those whom the traitor put to death.”[8]

No one speaks in response except Ganelon, Roland's stepfather. There is obviously a preexisting quarrel between the two, to which Ganelon later refers as justification for his actions,[9] but its exact

nature is obscure. Ganelon's evident hatred for his stepson, like Iago's hatred for Othello, outstrips any evident cause. He speaks with ferocity, calling Roland a fool and his advice arrogant. Why should we face death in battle, Ganelon asks, when all that we seek—vassalage, conversion, wealth, and control of Spain—is offered to us with hands clasped in supplication?

Duke Naimes, the emperor's oldest and wisest advisor, quickly rises to support Ganelon's proposal, while distancing himself from its tone of personal attack: “There is sense in it, if it be properly understood,” he soothingly notes.[10] Marsile has been defeated, Naimes contends, his castles shattered and his cities burned. Now that he pleads for mercy and offers hostages as reassurance, “it would be a sin to proceed” to war.[11] The rest of the Franks—who had been reluctant to disagree with Roland or to associate themselves with Ganelon's harsh words—now voice their approval.

Charlemagne then asks who shall go to Marsile in Saragossa. It is obviously a dangerous assignment given the fate of the two earlier messengers. Ganelon, who spoke first in favor of accepting Marsile's offer, is noticeably silent, underscoring the fact that he spoke more to attack Roland than because he believed Marsile was sincere. Naimes, who seconded Ganelon's advice, rises instead and offers to go, but Charlemagne quickly insists that he needs to keep Naimes close at hand for his wise counsel. Roland then volunteers, but Count Oliver sensibly points out that Roland is more likely to pick a fight than to prepare a peace, and he offers to go instead. Charlemagne silences them both, insisting that none of the twelve peers of France may be nominated. Archbishop Turpin of Reims is also rejected by Charlemagne.

Finally, Roland rises and says simply, “It will be Ganelon, my stepfather,” and all the Franks murmur their assent.[12] Ganelon is furious both at Roland, who has outmaneuvered him, and at the others, who clearly consider him dispensable. He threatens Roland openly:

> If God grants that I return from there,
> I shall stir up against you such a great feud
> That it will last for the rest of your life.[13]

Roland scoffs at the threat and mockingly offers to go in his place. But Ganelon cannot back away from his own advice: “I shall perform this somewhat reckless act, / Before giving vent to my great wrath.”[14] Roland laughs in contempt.

Realizing that his mission is as likely as not to result in his beheading, Ganelon seeks Charlemagne's protection for his young son

—Charlemagne's nephew and Roland's half brother—to whom he bequeaths his honors and his lands. He openly challenges Roland, Oliver, and the twelve peers, and then insists he will go to Marsile without protection: “Basile had none, nor his brother Basan.”[15] Yet, when Charlemagne holds out to Ganelon his right glove, the symbol of his authority, it falls to the ground. Whether this is an accident or whether Ganelon deliberately allows it to fall is unclear, but all regard it as an evil omen.

The quarrel of Roland and Ganelon bears comparison with that of Achilles and Agamemnon, which opens the *Iliad*. The *Roland* poet is every bit as skilled as Homer in letting the clash of Roland's pride and Ganelon's malevolence build and spill over with tragic consequences that others are powerless to prevent. It is not just a personal quarrel; it becomes a matter of state when Ganelon allows his desire for vengeance to overcome any allegiance to Charlemagne, to France, and to Christianity.

Blancandrin's plot of deception will now be turned into Ganelon's tool of revenge. Ganelon aligns the pagans’ objectives with his own by skillfully convincing first Blancandrin and then Marsile that the Saracens will never have peace as long as Roland lives. If they can kill Roland, along with Oliver and the twelve peers, by destroying the rear guard, Ganelon assures them, “then Charles would lose the right arm from his body,” and the Franks would never have the heart to reinvade Spain.[16]

Ganelon is evil, but he is neither a coward nor an insignificant figure. He is tall and broad and handsome, and he deliberately provokes Marsile in order to goad him into attacking Roland. Ganelon does not shrink when Marsile responds with anger and moves to strike him with a lance. Placing his back against a tree, Ganelon draws his sword and prepares to sell his life dearly, winning the admiration and trust of the Saracens. The deal is sealed with lavish gifts.

Ganelon returns to the French camp with hostages and tribute from Marsile, who will follow soon in order to receive the faith. He falsely tells Charlemagne that Marsile's army of four hundred thousand men abandoned him because they did not want to become Christians but that, when they attempted to sail away, they were overtaken by a violent storm and were all drowned. “Never will you see them again,” Ganelon promises.[17] Charlemagne accepts his assurances, and the Franks break camp.

> Charlemagne has laid waste to Spain,
> Taken the castles and ravaged the cities.
> The king says that his war is over;
> Towards the fair land of France the emperor rides.[18]

Yet four hundred thousand armed Saracens, the very ones Ganelon said had drowned, rest hidden in a wood on a nearby mountaintop. “O God, how sad!” the poet interjects. “The Franks know nothing of it!”[19]

## ROLAND'S *DESMESURE*

The emperor's dreams are full of foreboding. He distrusts Ganelon, yet, when Ganelon proposes that Roland command the rear guard among the narrow passes of the Pyrenees, Charlemagne reluctantly acquiesces. Roland is ideally suited to the task, and the emperor has no sound basis to disagree. Roland promises to defend his position to the death if attacked. Ganelon, with vicious irony, responds, “You speak the truth, as I well know.”[20]

Turpin and the twelve peers insist on remaining with Roland. Together they choose twenty thousand knights to form the rear guard at Rencesvals. Charlemagne rides with the rest of the army toward France, the land of home, family, and safety.[21] When they see Gascony in the distance, all are moved to tears. But Charlemagne displays a deeper anguish; he has left his nephew and his finest knights in the Spanish pass.

“High are the hills and the valleys dark,” the poet sings.[22] The pagan army approaches Rencesvals, armor and shields gleaming in the sunlight, sounding a thousand trumpets. When Oliver notes that a battle is likely, Roland's response is quick: “And may God grant it to us.”[23] He is eager to prove his valor and fulfill his duty to the king. “Now let each man take care to strike great blows,” he urges the others, “so that no one can sing a shameful song about us.”[24]

Oliver climbs a hill and sees that the Saracens are too numerous to count. He immediately knows that Ganelon has betrayed them, but Roland will hear none of it. He is willfully blind both to his stepfather's treachery and to the overwhelming odds against them. “Roland, just see all this,” Oliver insists.[25] But Roland will not see. Three times Oliver urges Roland to blow his mighty horn, Oliphant, so that Charlemagne will turn the army around to rout the Saracens.

> Companion Roland, blow your horn;
> Charles will hear it, as he rides through the pass.[26]

Three times Roland refuses, saying it would bring dishonor on him, his family, and the fair land of France were he to summon help:

> "God forbid," replies Roland to him,
> "That any man alive should say that
> Pagans made me blow the horn."[27]

Only when the two forces come face to face does Roland finally admit to Oliver that the rear guard has been betrayed by Ganelon, that the forces arrayed against them are overwhelming, and that, though they will make the Saracens pay with their swords, it will fall to Charlemagne to avenge them. Yet Roland, brandishing his lance at the head of the rear guard is undaunted:

> His body is noble, his face fair and smiling;
> His companion follows close behind
> And the Franks hail him as their protector.[28]

The battle begins in the stylized manner of Aeschylus's *Seven Against Thebes*. Marsile's nephew and twelve pagan barons ritually salute the king and promise to engage their counterparts in single combat. Each is slain in turn by Roland and the twelve peers of France in a series of *laisses*, in which the initial blows with the lance are described with only minor variations: the warrior's lance breaks through the shield of the Saracen warrior, tears open his hauberk (chain mail shirt), splits his breast, and pierces through his entire body, toppling him in death. When their lances are finally broken, the Franks attack with their swords, again striking blows of heroic force and exaggerated effect, blows that split heads down the middle, slice through bodies and saddles, and sever the spines of the horses. The poet makes no attempt at realism; the fights are balletic, and the deaths are the culmination of life at its most intense.

The Franks are fierce and heroic, each a match for any fifteen pagans. But sheer numbers eventually turn the tide, as fresh Saracen troops held in reserve are brought to the fore. The initial phase of the fight persists through thirty-four *laisses*. Only sixty of the Franks remain. Roland decides at last to sound his Oliphant so that Charlemagne will hear it and return. But this time it is Oliver who is adamantly opposed. Before the battle began, it was mere common sense to sound the horn. But now, in the midst of the fight, he contends, it would be shameful to do so. Oliver even threatens to break off the engagement between Roland and his sister Aude if

Roland summons help. He is angry at the needless loss of life, especially that of his dearest friend, Roland:

> Companion, you have been the cause of it.
> For a true vassal's act, in its wisdom, avoids folly;
> Caution is better than great zeal.
> Franks are dead because of your recklessness;
>
> Charles will never again receive our service.
> If you had heeded me, my lord would now be here;
> We should have fought this battle and won it.[29]

But, at this point, Oliver insists, all the two friends can do is to die together, while remaining true to the ideal of uncompromising heroic honor that drove Roland's initial decision.

Archbishop Turpin resolves the dispute by pointing out that it is too late to summon help in any event. The Franks will not reach them in time. But it is better for Roland to sound his horn so that they can be avenged and receive a Christian burial. Roland blows with all his might so that the horn call echoes through the valleys and across the mountains. He blows in pain and anguish until a vessel bursts in his temple and his mouth fills with blood.

There is no question that, before the battle began, the poet believed that Oliver was right. “Roland is brave and Oliver is wise,” the poet noted,[30] relying on the classical distinction between *fortitudo* and *sapientia* that runs through *Beowulf* all the way back to the *Iliad*. By blowing his horn, Roland would better have served his lord. The Saracens would have been defeated and most of the rear guard preserved.

Crucially, both Roland and Oliver assumed that the Saracen army could not withstand the full force of the Franks. At the same time, it was clear, at least to Oliver, that the rear guard alone could not defeat the forces arrayed against it. But Roland was overconfident to the point of recklessness. He was guilty of *desmesure* (excessiveness), the Old French counterpart of the Greek tragic flaw of hubris. It is unclear whether Roland actually believed, even at first, that the vanguard might drive off the Saracens or whether he deliberately chose a glorious death to ensure his place as a legendary hero. We have no access to the interior life of the hero and thus must make our own surmise. But, in the *Iliad*, Achilles made just such a choice explicitly when he stayed to fight at Troy, knowing he would die there, rather than sail home to a long but uncelebrated life. Had Roland sounded his horn at the outset, he might have married Aude and lived into old age. But no immortal song would have heralded his exploits. The *Song*

*of Roland* would not exist.

Two different conceptions of honor are at odds in the poem.[31] Roland adheres to the tragic code, which admits no compromise and considers a glorious death in combat to be the culmination of life and a guarantor of immortality in song. He believes his duty as a vassal is to defend his assigned post even at the cost of his life and the lives of all his men. Oliver, as the poem makes clear, is no coward. But he sees neither honor nor service in the needless deaths of his companions when help is readily at hand and when the overall strategic interests of France will be better served by summoning that help.

So why does Roland finally sound the horn, after refusing to do so when it could have made a difference? Some scholars suggest he is a Christian martyr who made a calculated sacrifice of himself and the entire rear guard in order to ensure the ultimate defeat of Islam in Spain. Yet that makes little sense, since he could have served the Christian cause more completely by summoning Charlemagne at the outset. Roland and the rear guard did not have to die in order to bring about the triumph of Christianity over Islam.

Roland sounds the horn because he realizes that his blind focus on personal honor is causing the deaths of those he loves the most. Roland is now willing to accept what he initially considered the dishonor of summoning help in order to atone for his prior overconfidence and its consequences. He makes amends in the only way he can, by blowing the horn even when it can no longer save him or his men. Roland's song marks the end of the heroic world. He sets aside his *desmesure* and shows humility and love in the face of imminent death.[32] Roland's tragedy is indeed a triumph of Christianity, but that triumph takes place on a personal level, and it is a triumph not over Islam but over an outmoded heroic code—a code of suffering and loss—that places personal glory ahead of all other values.[33]

In sounding his horn, Roland adds a third value to the classical virtues of *fortitudo* and *sapientia*: *caritas* (Christian love and charity). Roland surveys the field, the Franks lying dead everywhere, and addresses the few survivors for the first time in explicitly Christian terms:

> Lord barons, may God have mercy on you;
> May he grant all your souls a place in paradise
> And let them rest amongst celestial flowers.
> …
> Frankish barons, I see you dying for me,
> No longer can I protect you or give you succor.
> May God, who never lied, aid you;
> Oliver, brother, I must not fail you.

I shall die of grief, if nothing else kills me.
Lord companion, let us get back to the fray.[34]

In single combat, Roland—repeatedly referred to as Charlemagne's right hand—symbolically severs King Marsile's right hand in recompense. Marsile, whose son has been killed, flees back to Saragossa. Yet, one by one, the Franks die. Oliver is struck from behind by a lance. It is a mortal blow, but he fights on with Roland at his side. His vision blurred through loss of blood, Oliver strikes Roland on the helmet, then asks his pardon. The two men, in a deeply moving vignette, bow to one another. "Thus bound in love, the friends were cleaved apart."[35]

With the death of Oliver, only three of the Franks remain alive: Roland, Archbishop Turpin, and one other knight, Gautier del Hum. They fight with such determination that the Saracens, despite their numbers, are afraid to close in. Instead, they launch lances and darts at them. Gautier is killed outright, and Turpin is pierced by four spears. A proper vassal to the end, Turpin draws his sword and fights on. Roland gives a faint blow on the Oliphant to learn if the emperor is near. The valleys echo as sixty thousand trumpets respond. The pagans make a final rush at Roland and Turpin but are driven back. Recognizing that Roland "will never be vanquished by mortal man"[36] and that Charlemagne will soon be upon them, the Saracens flee back toward Spain. "This is your field and mine, thanks be to God," concludes Turpin.[37]

In the sudden but profound silence that follows, Roland embraces Turpin and binds his wounds. He then goes in search of Oliver and the twelve peers and lays them side by side before the archbishop, reconstituting in death their fellowship in life. The archbishop blesses them and commends their souls to God as Roland, overwhelmed by grief, falls to the ground in a faint.[38] When Turpin finally succumbs, Roland is alone; but his own death is near, as blood and brain fluid seep from his ears, his nose, and his mouth.

As scholar Eugene Vance notes, "The poetry of his final moments is a high point of Western epic, most notably, perhaps, because it sustains an extraordinary balance between passion and serenity."[39] Roland walks the distance of an arrow shot toward Spain and finds a small hill with a beautiful tree. He wants to be found out in front of his men, his face turned toward Spain, victorious even in death. His reparation is now complete. No Saracen weapon has pierced his body. It was the act of blowing the horn (which he first refused to do) that finally kills him.[40] It was an act of love, the forging of a connection with others, made in recognition that a man's life can find a better and more joyous outlet than the sword. Roland's apotheosis is complete; he

has combined *fortitudo* and *sapientia* with *caritas*. He dies defiant toward his pagan enemies, grieving for his companions but humble before his God, who sends three angels to bear Roland's soul to paradise. Roland is, indeed, a tragic hero, the ideal vassal, and a Christian martyr.

## THE REVENGE OF THE FRANKS AND THE CONQUEST OF CHRISTIANITY

The emperor arrives at Rencesvals to find the field blanketed with dead Franks and pagans. He weeps, and the knights echo his grief like a Greek chorus. But Duke Naimes calls Charlemagne's attention to the retreating Saracens, and he defers grief to revenge. Setting a guard over the battleground with instructions that the dead lie untouched, Charlemagne presses on. God, in response to Charlemagne's prayer, stops the sun in its tracks and holds back the night. The army catches up to the pagans in the Val Tenebros (valley of shadows). Every one of the Saracens either is put to the sword or drowns while seeking to escape across the river Ebro. The sun finally sets, as the Franks and even their horses collapse in exhaustion.

When they return to Rencesvals the next day, the emperor insists on going alone to search for Roland. He finds him, as he expected, out ahead of his men and his peers, in a posture of heroic pride, his head turned as a conqueror toward the enemies' land.[41] Charlemagne collapses over the body. "Never will a day dawn," he laments, "without my feeling sorrow for you…. My grief is so great that I no longer wish to live."[42]

Charlemagne has the hearts of Roland, Oliver, and Turpin removed and placed in a coffin of white marble. Their bodies and those of the other peers are wrapped in oriental silks for transport back to France. The rest of the dead warriors are given a Christian burial with great honors. "And then they left them," the poet concludes; "what else could they do?"[43]

But Charlemagne and his army are not done with war in Spain. Emir Baligant and his vast Moorish army have recently landed from Babylon after many pleas from his vassal Marsile. Marsile offers Baligant all of Spain as his fiefdom if he defeats Charlemagne and forces the Franks to renounce their Christianity. Thus the poet places Roland's death in the broader context of the struggle between Islam and Christianity.

The vanguard of Baligant's army arrives just as the Franks are prepared to depart. It is with grim determination that the emperor orders his men to arm themselves once more. He assigns two new lords to take the posts of Oliver and Roland and to carry Roland's sword and his Oliphant into battle. The Franks sound Charlemagne's war cry, "*Monjoie*," but there is little joy and much slaughter. The mood has changed from the martial exuberance of the first half of the poem. Many men, on both sides, die for their faith before Baligant and Charlemagne finally meet in single combat. Baligant is described as tall and broad with a handsome face. "O God, what a noble baron," interjects the poet, "if only he were a Christian!"[44] But he is not a Christian and will no more accept that faith than Charlemagne will embrace Islam.

The Christians' God tips the tide of battle in their favor. Charlemagne kills Baligant, and the pagans once again flee. Saragossa is sacked. Marsile dies of grief and his wound. One hundred thousand pagans accept baptism on threat of execution. "True Christians," the poet calls them,[45] without evident irony. Marsile's queen, Bramimonde, is taken as a captive to France, for Charlemagne wishes her to be a convert through love.[46] Again, the lack of apparent irony is striking.

## CHARLEMAGNE'S SORROW

When Charlemagne returns to his court at Aix, he immediately is confronted by Roland's fiancée, Aude. With tears Charlemagne offers his own son and heir to his kingdom as a replacement. But Aude does not wish to live on after Roland's death. Her face drained of color, she collapses and dies. Obviously, the physiology is implausible but in keeping with the dramatic absolutism of epic, and her death is moving in context.

Charlemagne must now deal with Ganelon. When Roland first sounded his horn, Charlemagne had Ganelon arrested for treason. He was chained like a bear and beaten with sticks by the scullions. But at Aix, he must face trial. Charlemagne summons his barons from many lands to give judgment. He states his case quite simply: Ganelon robbed him of his nephew, Roland, of Oliver and the twelve peers, and of twenty thousand knights. He betrayed them all for money.

Ganelon is defiant. He admits that he did these things but claims that they were justified by his personal quarrel with Roland, a quarrel he never disguised:

I challenged Roland the warrior
And Oliver and all his companions;
Charles heard it and his noble barons.
I avenged myself, but there is no treason in it.[47]

Ganelon is invoking the heroic code by which Roland himself lived and died, claiming that his actions were justified by the affront to his personal honor. He enlists in his defense one of his kinsman, Pinabel, who promises to give the lie by his sword to anyone who votes in favor of hanging Ganelon.

The barons, who are afraid of Pinabel's prowess, urge Charlemagne to let the matter drop, since nothing will bring back Roland, and Ganelon might provide useful service yet. “You are traitors to me,” bellows Charlemagne in anger and dismay.[48] They all have failed him, all but one. The knight Thierry is no Roland; he cuts no heroic figure. He is spare and slender, of medium height and build, more a lawyer than a warrior. But he is a loyal vassal and will defend his emperor. He points out that Ganelon's personal quarrel with Roland can provide no excuse. Roland was serving the emperor and should therefore have been protected. In acting against Roland and his companions, Ganelon committed treason. Thierry offers to uphold his verdict with his sword.

A formal trial by combat ensues. God will give his judgment by favoring one combatant over the other. Thirty of Ganelon's kinsmen are detained as sureties for Pinabel's position; Thierry gives hostages of his own, though everyone expects him to lose. “O God,” shouts Charlemagne, “make justice shine forth!”[49]

Despite Pinabel's strength and agility, Thierry stands his ground and gives back blow for blow. Pinabel offers Thierry “as much as you desire of my wealth,” if only he will let Ganelon be reconciled with the king.[50] But Thierry will hear nothing of it; instead, he offers to reconcile Pinabel with the king after justice is done to Ganelon. Pinabel, bound by the same heroic code as Roland, cannot surrender: “I should sooner die than be reproached for this,” he responds.[51] And die he does. God protects Thierry from a massive blow that shatters his helmet and slashes his right cheek. But God does not protect Pinabel from the counterstrike, which splits his head to the nasal. The thirty kinsmen who swore an oath for Ganelon are hanged. Ganelon himself is torn, limbs from torso, by four powerful horses. Dante will reserve for him an even more gruesome fate with Judas and other traitors in hell.

The emperor “has completed his justice / And appeased his great anger.”[52] But his deep-seated sorrow remains. “He who knows true

pain has learned a great deal," the poet notes.[53] Charlemagne, in his tragic wisdom, has become disillusioned with the world of violence he helped to make and cannot escape, a world that celebrates and honors that violence.[54] He grieves the loss of his nephew and companions. He does not relish their glory, and no songs of heroism will assuage their absence. Charlemagne is tired of heroes; he wants a human connection. Yet Charlemagne's own tragedy continues. The angel Gabriel comes to him in a dream to tell him that he must prepare to go to the aid of another Christian city besieged by pagans. He has no wish to go, but he will go nonetheless in obedience to God's command and the martial violence he cannot openly disavow.

Yet there are a series of subtle shifts in the *Song of Roland* that mark the change from a heroic culture to a more modern state, a state that values a company man like Thierry and that places religion at the center of civic life as a force of cohesion. The execution of Ganelon, even more than the death of Roland, shows that this new state will not tolerate a destructive individualism that pursues personal honor at the cost of societal demands.

At the same time, and more important for our purposes, there is a corresponding increase in emphasis on the interior life. As the state grows more powerful, the individual must retain a sacred, personal space where private aspirations and emotions may flourish. It is only a bit too extreme to say that the twelfth century invented the interior life and that the *Song of Roland* helped to begin that process. The characters of Roland and Ganelon are expressed solely in their words and their actions. There is no interior monologue. Yet we still see Roland change when he at last decides to sound the horn: his grief for his companions, his friendship with Oliver, his loyalty to Charlemagne, and even his love for Aude, all seem to play a role in softening his absolutism and rendering him more human as he faces his death, still defiant but full of *caritas*.

We see here the beginnings of a transition from the grandeur of epic to the intimacy of romance.[55] The love letters of Abelard and Heloise, by laying bare the couple's interior lives, undoubtedly sped this transition. So, too, did the secular poetry inspired by Ovid. But the novelistic form of the romance was ideally suited to reveal the importance of the individual, not as a leader of men but as a pilgrim soul on his own quest to find meaning and fulfillment. The *Song of Roland*, the last great epic, soon led to the great Arthurian romances of Chrétien de Troyes.

## CHRÉTIEN DE TROYES

The first troubadour poet of whom we have knowledge was William IX, Duke of Aquitaine. His granddaughter Eleanor is most closely associated with the development and practice of *fin'amors*, or what later became known as *l'amour courtois* (courtly love). She married Prince Louis of France in 1137. He soon became King Louis VII, the same Louis VII who attended the Council of Sens at which Abelard was condemned. They had two daughters before their marriage was annulled in 1152, ostensibly based on her failure to produce a son but more likely on her initiative to escape Louis's restrictive piety. Eleanor promptly married Henry, Duke of Normandy and Count of Anjou. He became Henry II of England in 1154 and, through their marriage, laid claim to vast areas of France. She bore him five sons and three daughters. Their son Richard, the future Richard the Lionheart, was named Duke of Aquitaine at the age of eleven, and Eleanor accompanied him to Poitiers. She reigned there as regent from 1168 and presided over an assemblage of lords, ladies, and poets dedicated to amorous verses and the dictates of courtly love.

Courtly love merged elements of Ovid (omitting the strong undercurrent of irony that runs through all of Ovid's poetry) with the feudal system of the twelfth century.[56] The lover enlists in the army of Cupid. He is consumed by his passion and becomes pale, drawn, and sleepless. His lady is remote, preferably married to someone else, and seemingly unobtainable. She is his sovereign; he is her vassal. He treats her with elaborate courtesy. He undergoes adventures, participates in tournaments, and performs acts of great prowess in order to be worthy of her love; the more perilous the test is the better. He puts up with her whims and caprices, grateful for any favor she might show him. In the end, he hopes to claim the ultimate reward for his love. Courtly love may be refined, but it is as unapologetically sexual as Ovid was.[57]

Henry II forced Eleanor to return to England in 1174 and imprisoned her for allegedly aiding three of their sons in a revolt against him. She was only released sixteen years later when Henry died and Richard assumed the throne. But the cult of love and chivalry had taken root in France. Countess Marie de Champagne, one of Eleanor's daughters by Louis VII, continued the tradition. She commissioned her chaplain, Andreas Capellanus, to prepare a handbook on courtly love. *The Art of Courtly Love*, written sometime between 1184 and 1186, was inspired by Eleanor's court at Poitiers more than a decade earlier.

Even more important, Countess Marie was a patron of Chrétien de

Troyes, about whom next to nothing is known other than the bits and pieces he chose to reveal in the prefaces to the five Arthurian romances he wrote between 1160 and 1191. In *Cligés*, for example, he tells us that he also translated and adapted various works of Ovid, and wrote a story about King Mark and Iseul—the first, if oblique, reference we have to the adulterous passion of Tristan and Iseult.

Chrétien did not invent the romance. He was preceded by works such as *Le Roman de Troie* and *Le Roman d'Eneas*, retellings of classic stories in Old French verse. Nor does he claim to have invented the Arthurian legends that were the starting point for his own works; Chrétien relied on a long tradition of oral and written accounts about King Arthur and his court. The most important written source to survive is Geoffrey of Monmouth's highly imaginative *History of the Kings of Britain*, which was completed around 1136. Geoffrey was quickly labeled by some as "the father of lies," a term previously applied with far less justice to Herodotus. But, as one scholar notes, "history keeps peeping through the fiction."[58] Exactly how much history peeps through Geoffrey's lengthy chapter on Arthur is a much-mooted point, but one that pales before the tenacity of the legend itself. As another scholar explains, "There is a kind of truth which simply does not matter."[59]

Most of the familiar elements of the Arthurian legend appear to originate in Geoffrey: the magician Merlin; the sword Excalibur; the assemblage of the greatest knights of the realm, including Arthur's nephew Gawain and his seneschal Kay; the pageantry, the jousting tournaments, and the code of chivalry; the beautiful but unfaithful Queen Guinevere; the treachery of Arthur's other nephew, Mordred; and the departure of the "mortally" wounded Arthur for the Isle of Avalon, from which he will return at the hour of Britain's greatest need.

Geoffrey wrote in Latin prose. Around 1155, Robert Wace translated Geoffrey's history into Old French verse, embellished upon it from other sources and added his own sense of drama. Wace's *Roman de Brut* is named for the mythical Brutus, great-grandson of Aeneas and eponymous founder of Britain. Wace added the famous Round Table; more important, his Arthur is less ferocious a warrior and more courtly a king than is Geoffrey's.[60]

Chrétien adds additional elements, presumably from sources that have not survived, such as Lancelot of the Lake and his affair with Guinevere; a reference to Camelot; and the story of Perceval and his quest for the Grail. Chrétien, in turn, became the principal source for Thomas Malory's massive *Le Morte D'Arthur*, which was first published in 1485 and quickly eclipsed Chrétien as the most influential text for all later writers in English adapting the legends of King Arthur and the

Knights of the Round Table, from Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* to T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*.

But Chrétien is not merely a transmitter of legends; he is a poet of genius and great subtlety, worth studying in his own right and as a pivotal figure in the evolution of Western consciousness. Three things about his Arthurian romances are worth noting at the outset. First, they are rarely *about* King Arthur and his court. With one exception, the court of King Arthur plays only a peripheral role as a plot device and colorful background. It is a place to which or from which Chrétien's heroes and heroines come and where they receive recognition and assistance, but their main stories lie elsewhere. The romances of Chrétien are to the legend of King Arthur what *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* is to *Hamlet.*

Second, as the reference to Tom Stoppard should indicate, Chrétien's romances are often highly comic. Indeed, he is sometimes closer in spirit to *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* than to the solemn, awestruck accounts of Geoffrey and Wace. Chrétien's Arthur is, in the later romances, a hapless cuckold who cannot father a successor nor keep the peace even within his own household, much less his realm. His knights can be malicious (Kay), ineffectual (Calogrenant), impulsive (Yvain), irresponsible (Gawain), false (Lancelot), and simple-minded (Perceval). Yet, somehow, Chrétien manages to invest the court of King Arthur with a high sense of romance while not overlooking its comic potential.

Third, despite the sometimes-broad comedy, Chrétien's romances have a serious purpose. The last three in particular are often referred to as “problem romances” in which the hallmarks of romance, though largely created by Chrétien himself, are called into question. The classical ideal of the hero combined *fortitudo* and *sapientia* (prowess and wisdom). The romance ideal is a *conjointure* (a joining together) of prowess and courtly love, and courtly love frequently is unwise; indeed, the more unwise, the better to show one's complete devotion to the beloved. Romances take place in a realm of marvels, largely separate from politics and ordinary domestic concerns. Yet social, familial, and moral responsibilities nonetheless intrude. The knightly code and the code of courtly love often conflict with one another and with other legitimate demands placed on the knight and his beloved. Chrétien constantly explores these conflicts and forces his characters and his readers to confront them as well. He questions the values to which the characters have pledged themselves.

In the preface to *Lancelot*, Chrétien draws a sharp distinction between *matière* and *san* (matter and sense). Chrétien's *matière* is the world of knightly combat, tournaments, adventures, marvels, declarations of love, pageantry, finery, and banquets. But his *san* both

undercuts and, in his greatest works, transcends that world. Yvain, Lancelot, and Perceval—each existing on the outskirts of the world of Arthur—manage to rise above both the code of chivalry and the artifice of courtly love. Their ever-charming friend Gawain, the perfect embodiment of Arthurian knighthood, does not. In the unique *conjointure* of prowess and love attained by each, Yvain, Lancelot, and Perceval find deeper truths to guide their lives. And, in his own *bele conjointure* of *matière* and *san*, Chrétien makes good his boast to fashion stories "that will be in memory for evermore, as long as Christendom lasts."[61]

## THE EARLY ROMANCES

The opening of the first Arthurian romance, *Erec and Enide*, already strikes a note of decline and discord. Arthur wishes to hunt the white stag in order to restore a tradition from the reign of his father, the great King Uther Pendragon. Gawain is opposed, however, because he who kills the white stag must by rights kiss the most beautiful maiden at court. Gawain explains that each knight will feel obliged to insist, at sword point, that the maiden on whom he has bestowed his favors is the most beautiful. Chivalry has reached such a socially destructive point that an idyllic custom cannot be revived without bloodshed.

Yet Arthur insists on the hunt and, racing ahead on his powerful Spanish horse, takes the white stag. At Guinevere's suggestion, however, the contentious kiss is postponed pending the return of Erec, son of King Lac, who has set off to avenge an affront to her honor committed by a powerful knight and his dwarf companion.

The story then follows Erec, who duly defeats the arrogant knight and sends him and his dwarf as suppliants to Guinevere. In the process, Erec falls in love with Enide, the beautiful daughter of an impoverished vavasour (lesser noble), and he brings her back to the court. By universal acclaim she is awarded the ceremonial kiss, and Arthur presides over an elaborate wedding celebration. "Here ends the first movement," Chrétien writes.[62] It is a charming story, a perfect romance, complete in itself. But it does not stop there with a "happily ever after" tag. The marriage of Erec and Enide has only begun, and both characters must evolve and mature through a series of challenges.

The precipitating cause of these events is Erec's passion for Enide. He eschews the tournaments and other feats of arms that bring knights

honor. He prefers to dally in bed with his beloved. Behind his back, the nobles lament his negligence and emasculation.

The late Karl Uitti, a leading scholar of Romance languages, rightly heard in *Erec and Enide* echoes of the story of Abelard and Heloise, which was well known to Chrétien.[63] Abelard, too, renounced a life dedicated to arms. He, too, neglected his duties for sex. And he too was, quite literally, emasculated. Enide, like Heloise, insists that she is Erec's concubine, not just his wife. She is frank in her enjoyment of sex, but she bitterly laments the shame she has brought upon him. So bitterly, in fact, that her tears awaken him one night, and, when he presses her for the cause, she tells him that he is held up to ridicule and spoken of with scorn on her account.

Erec shares another trait with Abelard. He is proud and has a fierce, impetuous temper. Stung by Enide's confession, he requires her to put on her best dress and sets her upon her finest horse, knowing that her beauty and apparent wealth will attract challengers. In full armor he sallies forth alone with his bride, forbidding her even to speak to him unless first addressed, a thinly veiled reference to the silence of Heloise enjoined by Abelard. Yet Enide will not remain silent, and, as a result, Erec and Enide will enjoy the fruits of a mature and mutual love denied to Abelard and Heloise.

The couple are soon set upon by three knights who, though bent on robbery and rape, observe proper etiquette in attacking one at a time. Unable to restrain herself, Enide warns the distracted Erec of the first knight's approach. He promptly dispatches all three seriatim and then chides Enide for breaking the silence he had imposed upon her. Shortly thereafter, five knights with a similar design fare no better; three of them are defeated, and the other two flee. Once again, though, Enide has warned Erec and been reproached for her disobedience and lack of faith in his prowess.

The challenges continue, but with Enide as an increasingly active partner. She insists on keeping watch while Erec sleeps. She tends his many wounds. She, rather than he, perceives the evil intentions of a count who has offered them shelter. It is she who devises their escape. As their perils multiply, so too do the instances not just of Enide's fidelity and devotion, but also of her wisdom and fortitude. Even when Erec appears to have been killed, she resists the importunities and physical assault of another count, and her protests wake Erec from the stupor into which he has fallen. Enide will not be silent and passive.

Together they confront all the perversions of knightly ideals: covetousness, lust, an addiction to violence for the sake of violence, and even common boorishness. They graduate to altruistic acts of chivalry. Through pain and trouble, they confirm their love for one

another and grow stronger as a couple. Erec recognizes Enide's strength, her loyalty, and her unselfish devotion. In the process, he rediscovers and transforms his love for her and his conception of the proper role of love in his life.

Only one challenge remains—the most dangerous of all—the Joy of the Court. In a magic, walled garden, a formidable knight, Mabonagrain, has pledged to remain with his beloved until conquered by a more powerful opponent. Outside the garden is a row of stakes with the heads of those who have failed. One stake is empty save for a horn. Either Erec will sound that horn in triumph or his head will join the others. Needless to say, he triumphs and then spares Mabonagrain, who is happy to be freed from his pledge and to rejoin the fellowship of society. The story ends with Erec and Enide, upon the death of Erec's father, crowned as king and queen at Nantes.

This first Arthurian romance questions chivalry itself and its socially destructive potential for both violence and isolation. The chivalric ideals of prowess and courtly love each have their darker side. Enide realizes that the prowess of knighthood, which she considered essential to Erec's reputation, too often leads to unsanctioned and unjustified violence. Erec realizes that the private pleasure of love and its dictates can lead to a walled garden of isolation and self-indulgence. Both must be exercised within a broader order of social and moral restraints. At each step, Enide aids and shares in Erec's growth in knowledge and self-awareness.[64] Their marital bond strengthens as they accept their joint duties and responsibilities and recognize how much each owes to the other.[65] Through their trials together, Erec and Enide become more than the conventional hero and heroine of a romance; they become husband and wife, and as such are ready to take their rightful places as king and queen.

Erec and Enide mature morally and emotionally over the course of their story. Cligés and Fenice, the main characters in Chrétien's next romance, do not. They are two-dimensional figures in a comedy that plays with the very conventions of romance that Chrétien himself has invented.[66] Indeed, *Cligés* is about the art and artifice of constructing a romance and the fine line between comedy and tragedy. Shakespeare will draw upon it for his *Romeo and Juliet* and end on the far side of that line. Yet *Cligés* is also about the ways in which literature itself alters consciousness. The characters in *Cligés* may not grow during the course of the story, but they are conscious of themselves throughout as playing certain parts, and they are eager to influence the outcome of their story, pushing it toward comedy and away from tragedy.

*Cligés* deals with a classic love triangle. In a lost work, Chrétien

had already written about King Mark and Iseult, in which he presumably included her passionate and tragic affair with Tristan. Chrétien was likely familiar with Thomas of Britain's *Roman de Tristan*, circa 1150, which exists now only in fragments but became the source for Gottfried von Strassburg's definitive *Tristan*. Chrétien would soon write about the love of Lancelot and Guinevere, which was destined to destroy King Arthur and the fellowship of the Round Table.

Cligés and Fenice, too, are in love. But Fenice is forced to marry Cligés's uncle, the Byzantine emperor Alis, who usurped the throne from Cligés's father when he was off winning fame at the court of King Arthur. On threat of deposition, Alis had promised not to marry and hence not to father an heir who might displace Cligés.

Alis's double treachery—the usurpation and the broken promise—licenses the young couple to take measures of their own. Fenice insists that she will not play the part of that shameful adulteress, Iseult. She is quite willing to give her body along with her heart to Cligés; she just wants to be sure that no one can say anything dishonorable about them. As Karl Uitti notes, in light of their subsequent actions, Fenice's scruples are, "quite simply, absurd."[67] With the help of skilled servants, Cligés and Fenice create stories within the story to deceive Alis and ensure their own happiness.

Fenice confesses her love of Cligés and her abhorrence of Alis to Thessala, her nurse (the indispensable confidant from Euripides through Shakespeare). Thessala is skilled in the arts of enchantment. She mixes a magic potion, echoing the love potion that engenders the uncontrolled passion of Tristan and Iseult. Here, though, the potion is administered to Alis, and it leads him to dream each night that he possesses his new wife, while Fenice safely remains a virgin.

That potion spares Fenice the embraces of Alis but does not give her what she really wants, which is Cligés (who, like his father, established his knightly bona fides at the court of King Arthur). So a second substory is planned. Thessala gives Fenice a potion that mimics death. Meanwhile, Cligés's Daedalus-like craftsman, John, creates a cleverly designed coffin and a tomb from which Cligés can extract her without being noticed. He then builds an addition to a house in an obscure part of Constantinople, with a secret entrance that cannot be discerned even by careful scrutiny. The ruse is not without its problems: three suspicious physicians, recollecting the story of Solomon's wife, who feigned death to be with her lover, abuse the body of the insensible Fenice in an effort to show that she is still alive. But Cligés ultimately succeeds in bringing her to their place of refuge, where "there was nothing the one wanted that the other did not approve."[68] Indeed, despite their complete isolation, "it seemed to the two of them when they embraced and kissed that all the world must

be better for their joy and solace."[69] Unlike Tristan and Iseult, who lived a deception but at least tried to fulfill their roles in society, Cligés and Fenice choose the life of passionate solipsism that Erec and Enide enjoyed in the first months after their marriage.

Of course, it cannot last. The couple is discovered lying together naked in their walled garden when one of Alis's vassals scales the wall to fetch an errant sparrow hawk. But Chrétien is even defter at extricating them from difficulties than Thessala and John together. Cligés and Fenice flee to the court of King Arthur; Alis, in his rage and shame, goes insane and conveniently dies; Cligés becomes the rightful emperor with Fenice as his empress. They do live happily ever after, though Chrétien notes that future empresses are kept like prisoners for fear they will follow Fenice's example.

In the preface to *Cligés*, Chrétien emphasizes the importance of what was called in Latin *translatio studii*, the process by which learning was transmitted from Greece to Rome and from Rome to France. Chrétien announces that the French are now the heirs and guardians of the two great traditions that preceded them. "Our books have taught us that chivalry and learning first flourished in Greece; then to Rome came chivalry and the sum of knowledge, which now has come to France."[70] *Cligés* is a playful attempt to explore the way that such learning transforms not just stories but even the characters within stories who self-consciously model their lives upon or distinguish them from the stories they have heard. Fenice self-consciously tries to alter the storyline of Tristan and Iseult; Cligés rather unfortunately suggests that Fenice will be welcomed at Arthur's court as Helen was at Troy; the physicians attempt to prevent a repetition of the story of Solomon's wife. Echoes within echoes of classical learning abound on multiple levels and affect the course of the narrative. Clever characters, such as Thessala and John, can concoct their own fictions to influence the plot. Yet Chrétien, the master artisan, remains always in control. He is responsible for translating learning into art, even as his characters translate learning into their own stories. Chrétien creates a *bele conjointure* of multiple, interlaced narratives. In his hands, human consciousness and self-consciousness become increasingly complex as by-products of *translatio studii*.

## *LANCELOT* AND *YVAIN*

*Lancelot* and *Yvain* likely were written at the same time. Indeed, the

plot of *Yvain* is influenced by the fact that a key character, Lord Gawain, is occupied in *Lancelot* when he should be attending to his responsibilities in *Yvain*.

Gawain, in fact, is the foil in all three of Chrétien's final romances. He is the perfect embodiment of knighthood, of chivalry, and of Arthurian values: he has great prowess, and he is handsome, loyal, courtly, and generous. As Arthur's nephew—the same relationship Roland had to Charlemagne—he has an ideal lineage. Gawain is without noticeable flaw, and yet his accomplishments are transcended, each time in a different way, by those of Lancelot, Yvain, and Perceval. Even at its finest, the Arthurian world is found wanting.

At the outset of *Lancelot*, Arthur is giving a banquet at his court at Camelot when a splendidly equipped knight enters and deliberately defies the king in front of his barons and his queen and her ladies. The knight, whose name we will learn is Meleagant, declares that he holds many lords and ladies from Arthur's realm prisoner and that Arthur is powerless to come to their aid, a point Arthur meekly acknowledges. Meleagant offers a challenge: if one of Arthur's knights will come to a nearby forest, accompanied by the queen, and defeat him in single combat, then he will return all the prisoners.

The seneschal Kay is the opposite of Gawain is many respects; he is a braggart with a viper's tongue, but he will also play a critical, if negative, role in each of the three final romances. Indignant over Meleagant's challenge, Kay threatens to leave the court for good despite entreaties to stay from both Arthur and Guinevere. Arthur foolishly agrees to grant him whatever he might request. This “rash boon” proves a disaster, for Kay chooses to lead the queen into the wood, where he does battle with Meleagant and is quickly unhorsed. Meleagant abducts the queen and leads her off as his prisoner.

Two knights, Lancelot and Gawain, set off in pursuit. Lancelot, in his fury and his passion, rides two horses to their deaths before continuing on foot. He comes across a dwarf driving a cart and inquires if the queen has passed this way. “If you want to get into this cart I'm driving,” the dwarf responds, “by tomorrow you'll know what has become of the queen.”[71] Lancelot hesitates for two steps before jumping into the cart. He hesitates because, as the narrator explains, carts in those days were used as pillories for criminals. To mount a cart is to invite shame and ridicule. Yet Lancelot is willing to subordinate his honor to his love. He becomes known to all, in the first part of the story, simply as the Knight of the Cart, a term of derision.

Gawain, by contrast, refuses to enter the cart. He preserves his knightly honor and thus fails in his quest for the queen. For Gawain, love is but *courtoisie*, a form of courtliness expected of a knight and

part of the code of chivalry. But for Lancelot, love is not an artifice or a diverting game; it is an all-consuming passion that drives him single-mindedly to the queen.

His thoughts are so deep that he forgets who he is; he is uncertain whether or not he truly exists; he is unable to recall his own name; he does not know if he is armed or not, nor where he is going nor whence he has come. He remembers nothing at all save one creature, for whom he forgets all others; he is so intent upon her alone that he does not hear, see, or pay attention to anything.[72]

Lancelot is so totally absorbed by his love for the queen that he becomes a comic figure as well as a heroic one. Indeed, as one scholar notes, "The comic moments coincide with his most intense expressions of passionate devotion, and it is the same devotion that moves him to his greatest achievements: the sublime and the comic are inextricably intertwined in this paradoxical hero."[73] Lancelot is unhorsed in a river because he does not notice the approaching knight or hear his challenge. He fights Meleagant with his back turned toward him so that he can keep his gaze fixed on the queen. Disaster is averted only when the queen urges him to put Meleagant between himself and herself so that he can both face his opponent and look at her. Later, during a tournament, the queen whimsically commands him at various points to "fight his best" and to "fight his worst."[74] Lancelot swivels from unbeatable warrior to craven incompetent and back in obedience to her wishes.

As these examples show, the queen is still playing the game of courtly love. When Lancelot frees her and the other prisoners held by Meleagant, she refuses to greet him or to respond to his inquiries and leaves the room, noting that she will only depart when Lord Gawain comes for her. She later explains that she was upset with Lancelot's two steps of hesitation before he entered the cart, as if he valued honor more than her. But Lancelot is playing no game. He departs, stupefied with confusion and grief, to find Gawain.

When rumors reach Guinevere that Lancelot has been killed by locals loyal to Meleagant, she repents her imperious dismissal and dispenses with the artifices of courtly love. Upon his safe return, she invites him to her bed, and they consummate their love in deep secrecy. "On parting, Lancelot bowed low before the bedchamber, as if he were before an altar. Then in great anguish he left."[75] Gawain charms every woman he meets with his *courtoisie*. But Lancelot fascinates them with his inner fire. His religious devotion to love pushes aside all other consideration and invests him with a prowess Gawain cannot match.

Chrétien did not finish *Lancelot*. The text indicates, without explanation, that he invited another writer to complete the romance.

After numerous complications, Lancelot returns to Arthur's court where Guinevere postpones any intimate reunion with him “until she could find a better and more private place where they might reach a safer harbour than they would have now.”[76] Chrétien's instincts in leaving his story unfinished were sound. There is no safer harbor for the two lovers. The full story of Lancelot and Guinevere can have only a tragic ending to which *Lancelot* is but a prelude. Their adulterous “love madness” transcends the conventions of Arthurian romance.

Chrétien returns to those conventions in *Yvain*, which many consider his most perfect and his most finished work. In some ways, *Yvain* is the inverse of *Erec and Enide*. Erec neglects prowess for love and, with Enide's help, learns to integrate his marriage with his social and martial responsibilities. Yvain neglects love for prowess, abandoning his new bride to seek the empty glory of tournaments. He can win her back only after redirecting his prowess in the genuine service of women and accepting his responsibilities as husband and protector.

Yet *Yvain* is more deeply subversive of Arthurian ideals than *Erec and Enide*. Chivalry itself is exposed as devoid of moral authority, as too often licensing and encouraging violence, oppression, and cruelty. There is a telling scene in which Gawain comes across a young girl reading aloud from a romance to her parents as they sit in a lovely orchard. This idyll is made possible, however, by the labor of maidens sent as tribute and kept in misery as slaves. The surface charm of romance hides an often ugly reality.

Chrétien's preface is itself steeped in irony as he complains that love in the modern world is greatly abased, reduced to empty pleasantries given the false name of love. Those who loved in the days of King Arthur, he explains, “were known to be courtly and valiant and generous and honourable.”[77] Yet those terms themselves are given the lie by behavior that is empty of virtue.

One evening at Arthur's court, Yvain's cousin, Calogrenant, tells of the day when, in search of adventure to test his courage and his strength, he was directed to a spring in the shade of a beautiful pine tree. There he poured water from the spring and cast it upon a hollow stone. A huge tempest arose, with lightning, fierce winds, snow, hail, and rain. The entire forest shook. When the storm finally abated, the air was clear and pure and the tree filled with birds singing in marvelous joy and harmony. An armed knight soon galloped into the clearing and reproached Calogrenant for bringing war against him and damaging his woods and his castle without either provocation or a proper challenge. They fight, and the unknown knight strikes Calogrenant a mighty blow with his lance, unseating him. The knight, Esclados, takes Calogrenant's horse and departs, leaving Calogrenant

dazed, but alive, on the ground.

Yvain immediately resolves to avenge Calogrenant's shame. Yvain is mocked by Kay for his wine-fueled bravado, which only increases his resolve. Arthur announces a desire to see the spring, the storm, and the marvel. But Yvain, certain that Arthur will allow Kay or Gawain to battle the knight, steals off on his own and makes his way over several days to the spring. He is determined to win the glory or the shame for himself, and when Esclados appears they engage in a fierce and protracted fight, each landing many blows. The narrator tells us that they "fought most honourably,"[78] because they stayed on horseback and neither sought to wound the other's horse. Yet the irony is clear. They both may have observed the fighting courtesies of the chivalric code, but Yvain's violence is wholly unsanctioned, unprovoked, and directed at a knight who simply is defending his land and his home. Moreover, when Yvain finally deals Esclados a fatal blow to the head, he shows none of the mercy that Esclados showed to Calogrenant, whose honor already has been avenged. Intent on obtaining some visible token of victory with which he can silence Kay's taunts, Yvain pursues the dying Esclados relentlessly back to his castle. When the portcullis falls behind Esclados, Yvain's horse is cut in half, and Yvain is trapped inside.

Yvain is hidden from the angry townspeople by Lunette, a lady in waiting to Laudine, the wife of Esclados. Lunette aids Yvain because she was once sent with a message to the court of King Arthur, and Yvain was the only one there who treated her with courtesy. From his place of hiding, Yvain catches glimpses of Laudine in her deep grief and conceives a passion for her. He displays all the prescribed symptoms of courtly love. Indeed, he welcomes his prison because it keeps him close to his love, a plot device Chaucer will put to good use in the Knight's Tale and Stendahl will use later still in *The Charterhouse of Parma*. Laudine hates her husband's murderer and yet, through the deft intervention of Lunette and at the urging of her advisors (whom Laudine manipulates to urge her to do what by then she already desires), she accepts Yvain as her new husband. Yet the love each professes is intermixed with pragmatism. Laudine needs a powerful knight to defend her fountain, and none of her subjects are up to the task. Yvain, by marrying the widow, has the visible "token" of his victory he will need to silence Kay. It is a convenient arrangement for both parties but one that does not last.

When Arthur and his companions arrive at the spring, Kay is indeed allowed to battle the knight who arrives in full armor after the storm. Yvain readily unseats him and then discloses his identity. Laudine and Yvain entertain the entire group lavishly for a full eight days. Gawain charms Lunette and places himself at her service. Less

happily, Gawain convinces Yvain, who has been married less than two weeks, to depart with them in order “to frequent tournaments, engage in combat, and joust vigorously.”[79] Gawain argues that a man should not grow soft on account of a woman, lest he lose both his own honor and her respect and affection: “A man must be concerned with his reputation before all else!”[80] Gawain frankly admits that if the situation were reversed, he would stay with his beautiful bride, but he makes it a test of their friendship to fight together under the same banner. Laudine reluctantly consents to Yvain's departure for one year but not a day longer. As a token of her love, she gives him a ring that she says will increase his prowess and protect him from all harm.

So Yvain leaves his new wife and his responsibility as protector of the fountain to return to the juvenile ways of his male fraternity. Yvain simply is not ready to grow up, not until he has exhausted all other possibilities.[81] Inevitably, he overstays the year, and a messenger arrives from Laudine, who derides him as a liar and deceiver. “Yvain, my lady no longer cares for you,” the messenger concludes, “and through me she orders that you never again approach her and keep her ring no longer.”[82]

Yvain is stupefied. He leaves the court of Arthur, which has lost all interest for him. Yet he has no wife or home to which he can return. He has lost his identity. He has lost his way in that pathless wood between boyhood and manhood. He even loses his mind for a time and is restored to sanity only by the ministrations of another lady in waiting for yet another mistress besieged in her castle. Yvain turns his prowess from a celebration of his own honor into an instrument of service to others, especially women. In most of these adventures, he is accompanied by a lion he saved from a serpent. The lion, frankly, displays more loyalty and unadulterated affection, with no admixture of pragmatism, than any of the human characters in the romance.

Yvain, having lost his own identity, becomes known only as the Knight with the Lion, and, under that guise and with the help of Lunette, he eventually works his way back to the good graces of Laudine. But, first, he must make up for the shortcomings of his best friend, Gawain, who continues in his charming and irresponsible ways. He saves Gawain's niece from a giant while Gawain is off searching vainly for the queen rescued by Lancelot. Then he saves Lunette from being burned alive by battling three knights who had accused her of treason. Once again, Gawain, who casually had promised Lunette his protection, is absent. Finally, Yvain and Gawain themselves unwittingly do battle because Gawain, without any thought for right or wrong, agrees to champion a girl trying to rob her younger sister of her inheritance. Yvain, in turn, champions the younger of the two. The knights, each fighting in disguise, meet in

trial by combat officiated by Arthur and nearly kill each other before Arthur finally puts a halt to the proceeding by forcing the evil older sister to give way. The two friends, having removed their helmets and disclosed their identities, embrace. The hatred they showed toward each other while in disguise gives way to the love they feel for one another.

The opposite happens with Laudine. She still feels abandoned and betrayed by Yvain. But she shows great admiration and affection for the unknown Knight with the Lion and promises Lunette to do everything in her power to reconcile that knight with his lady, who of course turns out to be herself. Trapped by her promise, Laudine accepts Yvain again as her husband, though hardly with good grace. “If it were not such an ugly and wicked thing to break one's oath,” she explains, “this knight would find no peace with me no matter what his efforts.”[83] Yvain in his joy forgets all his prior hardships. But Laudine does not forget the hardships he imposed upon her. The narrator says that she once again loves and cherishes Yvain. Yvain himself is sure of it; the reader is less so. As medieval specialist Tony Hunt notes, with Chrétien, “love conquers all things except, apparently, irony.”[84]

## *PERCEVAL*: THE QUEST FOR THE GRAIL

It is no coincidence that Chrétien's two unfinished works—*Lancelot* and *Perceval*—impressed themselves most on the imaginations of future readers and writers. The open-ended nature of those stories led naturally to speculation about how they might continue. More importantly, the tensions inherent in the plots—the adulterous passion of Lancelot and Guinevere and the Grail Quest of Perceval—exercised (and still exercise) nearly universal fascinations: love at odds with society and a goal that transcends the material world. Chrétien certainly did not invent either tragic adultery or the epic quest. Homer established the patterns for both, respectively, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. But Chrétien embodied these stories in an intimate, novelistic setting that brought them achingly close to the reader and yet treated them with the distancing irony so essential to clarity. *Don Quixote* is an obvious successor; so, too, are *Madame Bovary* and *The Man without Qualities*.

Perceval is the model of the holy fool in search of the transcendent. Raised by his mother in complete ignorance of and isolation from the world, his naivety sets him apart from others and makes him an object, first, of ridicule and, later, of admiration. In this

archetypal bildungsroman, he learns to master the chivalric code but quickly finds it hollow. He is destined to become the greatest of all knights, yet the values and concerns of the Arthurian world do not hold him.

When Perceval visits the otherworldly castle of the Fisher King—a counterpart perhaps to Arthur's Isle of Avalon—he is vouchsafed a vision of the grail and the bleeding lance as they pass before him. But the code of chivalry he has learned and his own past sin keep him from speaking up and penetrating to the heart of the mystery. Having missed that chance to inquire and learn, he will dedicate his life in an attempt to atone.

The exact significance of the grail—a silver serving platter—is left unstated in *Perceval*, which is part of its open-ended interest. In the hands of later writers, it would become the cup that held the blood of Christ after his side was pierced with a lance or the chalice he offered the disciples at the Last Supper. The bleeding lance is also associated with the crucifixion, and in *Perceval* itself it is said that the lance will lead to the destruction of Arthur's realm. The vision and its deep mystery transform Perceval's life.

Once again, Gawain is the foil. His own striving is worldly and conducted within the Arthurian code he is sworn to uphold.

But Perceval swore a different oath. He promised that he would not spend two nights in the same lodgings until he had learned who was served from the grail and had found the bleeding lance and had been told the true reason why it bled. He would brave every danger and test himself against every knight of preeminent repute. He would not abandon his quest for any hardship.[85]

The reader feels that Perceval will succeed where Gawain fails. Or, perhaps more accurately, that they do not share the same definitions of success, that they inhabit different worlds. Perceval's quest is no longer for adventure but for meaning.

In the preface to *Cligés*, Chrétien had expressed his wish that the *translatio studii*, "the sum of knowledge, which now has come to France," might never leave. He noted wistfully that "no one speaks any more of the Greeks or Romans; their fame has grown silent and their glowing ember has gone out."[86] The ember from Chrétien, like those of his Greek and Roman predecessors, has not truly gone out. It glows still in his Arthurian romances and casts its light on all of Western literature since his day.

Chrétien's work looks forward to the quotidian tales of Boccaccio and Chaucer, which, joined with the realistic naturalism of Dante, anticipate the modern novel. The search for wisdom—by turns epic, tragic, comic, lyric, philosophic, and religious—will have a new, highly flexible tool that can employ any or all of those elements in its

in-depth exploration of human character, motivation, experience, and meaning. The classical ideal of wisdom as reflected in deeds and speech, and the medieval ideal of wisdom as reflected in the love and acceptance of God, will gradually give way to an ideal of sympathetic understanding and, even more, to the quest for self-understanding. The seeds of that internalization are found in Chrétien and more subtly in the *Song of Roland*.

# Chapter 7

# FRANCIS AND AQUINAS

## Mendicant Friars Who Transformed the Church

When we speak of Saint Francis of Assisi, we naturally refer to him simply as Francis. We immediately are on a first-name basis with this gentle man who embraced poverty and humility, ministered to lepers, sang canticles to the sun and the moon, and preached sermons to the birds. When we speak of or think about Saint Thomas Aquinas (which is rare in itself), we naturally refer to him as Aquinas or, perhaps even more formally, Thomas Aquinas. This man, who embraced the intellect and dared to turn Aristotle into a theologian, is a distant and formidable figure.

Francis was small and thin and quick in his movements. Aquinas was large and heavy and slow. Francis embraced his fellow creatures, human and animal alike, and was highly suspicious of books and learning. Aquinas was shy and withdrawn, and he absorbed whole libraries. Francis wrote (or dictated) very little. Aquinas produced an astonishing eight million words during his scholarly career. Yet, in crucial respects, they were alike. Both were mendicant friars leading lives of absolute poverty. Both saw evidence of God in all that exists; their religion was a celebration of creation itself. Finally, both were radicals who transformed the Catholic Church with the strength of their vision and the passion of their commitment. Their two paths diverged sharply: Francis sought an emotional connection with Christ, while Aquinas sought an intellectual synthesis in God. The Catholic Church, to its credit, took both paths.

# FRANCIS

When Francis died in 1226, he was already famous, venerated as a saint within his lifetime and officially canonized less than two years later. Thousands of men already had flocked to his new order of "Friars Minor," as the Franciscans were originally called. They had spread throughout Europe and into the Middle East. Many women had also joined the "Poor Sisters," or "Poor Clares" as they became known, after Francis's first female disciple, who was also from Assisi. There was a hunger for stories about Francis, and hagiographers were happy to oblige. They wrote about Francis as a modern-day Christ figure of perfect simplicity and humility, living in absolute poverty, working miracles, converting the Saracens, and, at the end of his life, miraculously receiving the stigmata—the wounds in hands, feet, and side borne by the crucified Christ. As was the case for the early historians of King Arthur, these writers followed the principle that "there is a kind of truth which simply does not matter."[1]

Even today, biographies of Francis are full of lovely stories of questionable provenance. Disentangling man and myth is difficult, if not impossible. Some do not even think it desirable. Nikos Kazantzakis, in the prologue to his moving novel on Francis, wrote that the legend is "truer than truth itself" and that he wanted "to match the Saint's life with his myth, bringing that life as fully into accord with its essence as possible."[2] But Kazantzakis claimed this right for art; he was striving for a higher truth than the mere recitation of known facts might allow. The same was true for Franco Zeffirelli's beautiful movie *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (1972), which also took considerable liberties with the known historical facts.

G. K. Chesterton began his still highly readable, if eccentric and often wayward, biography of Francis by noting that there were three possible ways to write about the saint. First, one can strip away the mystical and the miraculous and focus on Francis "as a figure in secular history and a model of social virtues": the sincere democrat, the father of ecology, the proponent of compassion, the bringer of peace, the champion of the marginalized and shunned—in short, the ideal modern liberal.[3] Second, one can be "defiantly devotional" and focus on Francis as a medieval saint: his visions, his fervent prayers, his self-mortifying asceticism, his thirst for martyrdom, his receipt of the stigmata.[4] The first approach would be a falsification; the second would be largely unintelligible and even repellant to those who do not share Francis's particular brand of religion. Chesterton thus chose a third way, which I will follow here as well. He sought to reconcile the intuitively attractive characteristics of the man with the more difficult

to follow and at times “doubly dark” twists of his religious experience in order to present a complete picture of the man and the saint.[5]

The Poverello, the little poor man of Assisi, was a complex human being of remarkable determination and charisma. He was a man of spontaneous joy and ineradicable sorrow who embraced all things as gifts from God except his body and who forgave all weaknesses except his own. Francis did indeed seek, sincerely and passionately, to live the life of Christ. As such, he was a walking reproach to the wealth and power of a church that had lost its way. Ultimately, and perhaps inevitably, his movement was institutionalized by that very church. Yet Francis's uncompromising purity and deep compassion have always retained and still retain their personal appeal. After Christ, Francis is the most important spiritual exemplar in the Christian world; indeed, for many, the character and teachings of Francis help illuminate the character and teachings of Christ. As Chesterton reminds us, “If St. Francis was like Christ, Christ was to that extent like St. Francis.”[6]

## LIFE

Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, nicknamed Francesco, was born in Assisi in late 1181 or early 1182. His father, Pietro, was a successful cloth merchant who traveled frequently to France. His mother, Pica, came from a well-to-do French family. Assisi was a small Italian city of about three thousand in Umbria, twenty miles from Perugia.

Francis received a basic education, learning to read and write Latin. By the age of fourteen, however, he was already working for his father, keeping the accounts and occasionally traveling with him to France, where he developed a love of French troubadour songs and poetry.

Francis began to run with a fast crowd of aristocratic youths, fueled by his father's money. He joined a *brigata*, a society or band of pleasure seekers, and he spent freely to host dinners and drinking bouts. His generosity and natural charm got him elected as their leader. How much of the group's activity was youthful folly and how much blended into serious delinquency is unclear. Francis's parents did not seem to mind his profligate ways, however, given that they allowed him to associate with the higher class in Assisi.

Yet relations between the classes were hardly stable. Assisi, like many towns in Italy, was riven by factions along two lines. First, Assisi was caught in the long-running battle between the popes and the

German kings who were also the Holy Roman emperors and who still controlled much of central and northern Italy. Those who favored the emperors became known as Ghibellines, while those favoring the popes were Guelfs.

In 1174, Assisi was besieged and conquered by forces loyal to the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa. Upon the death of Frederick's son Henry VI in 1197, when Francis was sixteen or seventeen, Assisi established itself as an independent commune. But a second line of division persisted within Assisi, as it did in so many other Italian cities at this time. The well-to-do merchant class known as the *popolo*, but hardly representing the people generally, was at odds with the *boni homines*, the aristocrats. The latter, ultimately ousted, fled to the Guelf stronghold of Perugia, where they enlisted that city in their plans for revenge.

The Battle of Collestrada in 1202 was a complete defeat for Assisi. Francis, who was a member of the communal militia and fought as a knight on horseback, was taken prisoner by the Guelf allies along with many others. He spent a year in Perugia in damp, unsanitary conditions before his father could ransom him. Francis returned to Assisi with his health badly damaged; his psychological state was even more precarious. The aristocratic families returned in triumph and demanded restitution. An accord was reached between the *popolo* and the *boni homines*, and, in 1204, the city swore allegiance to the pope.

Francis had early dreams of glory as a knight. The *chansons de geste* and *chansons d'aventure et d'amore* were widely known when he was a youth. *Jongleurs* still traveled about to sing them for appreciative audiences. Francis knew the stories of Roland and Oliver, of Lancelot and Guinevere, and of Perceval. He planned to make himself famous through deeds of arms and to enjoy the fruits of courtly love. He even told his fellow prisoners in Perugia: "Know that one day I will be venerated throughout the whole world."[7] He was right, but not for the reasons he anticipated.

Even after returning to Assisi, Francis undertook to fight in the service of the pope against the forces of the emperor in southern Italy. A small group of knights set out together for Apulia, almost four hundred miles away. But Francis fell ill in Spoleto, only twenty miles from home, and never made it. He eventually returned to Assisi while his friends carried on, marking a humiliating end to his knightly ambitions. Yet he was already beginning to envision a new form of life to replace the knightly ideal. He began, in his parents' eyes, to behave increasingly oddly. He spent more and more time alone, in prayer and meditation, and seemed lost in thought even when with others. It was a time of alternating restlessness and lassitude, exhilaration and depression.

Several anecdotes from this period—anecdotes whose authenticity there is no reason to doubt—reveal his character. He was selling cloth in the marketplace, busy striking a bargain with another merchant, when a beggar came to him, seeking alms. Francis brusquely dismissed the beggar and completed his transaction. Yet he was quickly filled with remorse and raced through the streets of Assisi, catching up to the undoubtedly surprised beggar and showering him with coins.

Francis, like most men and women of his time, had an abhorrence and fear of lepers. The disfiguring and contagious disease of leprosy was still common. Lepers were forced to live apart and to wear bells or carry a shaker to warn others of their approach. When Francis came across a leper on an isolated road, he impulsively jumped off his horse and hugged and kissed the man before proceeding on his way. When Francis turned around, the leper had disappeared, and Francis became convinced that the leper had been Christ himself come to test him. Francis then regularly visited the nearby leprosarium. “I did mercy to them,” he says in the testament written shortly before his death, and after that he did not wait long before abandoning all worldly pursuits.[8] Overcoming his aversion to lepers and learning to treat them as fellow humans was both a slightly hysterical form of penance and a new identification with those most shunned and marginalized by society.

Francis went to Rome on pilgrimage and visited the tomb of Saint Peter. He gave away all his money and then exchanged his clothes with a beggar outside the church. Francis himself began to beg for alms dressed in the beggar's rags, but he did so, bizarrely, in French, which no one was likely to understand.[9] He was deliberately humbling and humiliating himself.

On his return, Francis went to pray at the ruins of the church of San Damiano near Assisi. While kneeling in prayer, he heard the voice of Christ telling him to repair God's church. Francis took the injunction literally but also metaphorically as an indication that the Catholic Church, in its wealth and grandeur, needed to connect once again with its foundations in the gospels. Francis sold his horse, his arms, and even his brightly colored clothes in order to pay for building materials. He appeared in Assisi filthy and bedraggled and was treated as one who had gone crazy.

His father, Pietro, was appalled. It was one thing for his son to be extravagant in order to run with the nobles; it was quite another thing to give his family's money to the poor or to repair an abandoned church. His father sought officially to disown Francis and to have him declared incompetent. Francis had a legal right to half his mother's

dowry, which was then funding the family business. Pietro was concerned that Francis would squander that money and ruin the business for the rest of the family.

Bishop Guido of Assisi placed Francis under his protection and convinced him to return the money he had taken for the church and to renounce all further claims on his family's property. He would henceforth be subject to the church, no longer to his father or civil law. As depicted in a famous scene in the Franco Zeffirelli film, Francis symbolically returned all his belongings, including the clothes on his back, to his father. He then announced that he had no family or city and would no longer say “my father,” but only “our father, who art in heaven.”

Cursed by his father, insulted by his brother, and alienated even from his mother, Francis began to live the life of a penitent. Dressed in a cross-shaped habit of coarse brown cloth, secured with a simple cord, Francis spent his time restoring churches, ministering to lepers, and going among the poor and the sick. His characteristic greeting was, “The Peace of the Lord be upon you.” Francis begged his food on a daily basis or did manual labor in exchange for a meal. He allowed himself no possessions other than a prayer book.

The early thirteenth century was a time of high religious fervor in Italy. In and around Assisi alone, there were eleven monasteries and seven convents. Yet Francis had embarked on an altogether different endeavor. He did not want to enter a monastery but rather to live in the world as a disciple of Christ, in poverty and humility, preaching through example the message of the gospels. He called himself, quite appropriately, a *jongleur de Dieu*, who sang the praises of each person, each creature, and even each object as a vibrant, sacred thing, created by God. His “Canticle of Brother Sun,” which he wrote late in life, is reflective of his vivid reverence for all things. It reads in part:

> Praised be You, my Lord, with all your creatures,
> especially Sir Brother Sun,
> Who is the day and through whom You give us light.
> And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendor;
> and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.
> Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
> in heaven You formed them clear and precious and
> beautiful.[10]

Animals and birds showed neither fear nor hostility in his presence. Whether he really tamed the fierce wolf of Gubbio or preached a sermon to the birds is unclear and unimportant, though at least the latter seems characteristic. There is no doubt that he had a

remarkable rapport with all living things, and the church in 1980 rightly declared him the patron saint of ecology.

Francis began to attract disciples, one or two at first and then more. The small band sought guidance on how they should conduct themselves through the *sortes biblicae*, according to which they opened the New Testament to three random passages. They came upon the admonitions of Jesus in Mark 10:21: "go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me"; Luke 9:3: "Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic"; and Matthew 16:24: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."

These injunctions became the "form of life" for the new order, which Francis called the *Fratres Minores*, meaning Friars Minor or Lesser Brothers. Every new member gave all his possessions to the poor, adopted an itinerant lifestyle in order to spread the gospel, and did penance for his own sins and those of humankind. Some who joined them were from the poor; others were educated nobles. All existed on the same footing within the new order. They had no fixed abode, although the restored Church of St. Mary of the Angels at the Portiuncula became the de facto base to which they returned.

When the Lesser Brothers reached the symbolic number of twelve members, they set out for Rome in the spring of 1209 to have their "Rule" approved by Pope Innocent III. The pope did approve their mission as preachers of penance, albeit provisionally and without any institutional recognition. He was waiting to see if the movement would take hold. He did not have to wait long.

Francis was a charismatic figure. He was not prepossessing in appearance. He was short, angular, and awkward as a speaker. But people were naturally attracted to him and even fascinated by his asceticism, his spontaneous enthusiasm, and his total sincerity. They viewed him even then as a living saint. Francis disdained such talk, calling himself instead a new fool (*novellus pazzus*). There is no question, however, that the Order of the Friars Minor was built around and dependent upon his personality, especially in its early days. The real "Rule" of the order was the example provided by its founder.

As he attracted increasing numbers of followers and the movement spread throughout Italy and the rest of Europe, Francis was forced to be an administrator and spiritual leader, presiding over "chapter" meetings at the Portiuncula. The role was at cross-purposes with his natural humility. He espoused a standard litany of monastic virtues: poverty, penance, worship, humility, charity, chastity, and

obedience. But the brothers were to practice those standard virtues in a nonstandard setting, without institutional support, in which they were wholly dependent upon the grace of God and the mercy of their fellows. Francis wanted them to share the lives of the working poor, doing day labor in exchange for food. He forbade the brothers to gather more food or alms than they needed for the day at hand. “If we had any possessions,” Francis said, “we should need weapons to defend them.”[11]

Although Francis was loyal and obedient to the established church, he believed that the clergy had become too comfortable, too powerful, too far removed from the radical message of Christ. Even the austere life of the monk was too secure for Francis. The monk at least knew where he would get his supper, however plain that supper might be.[12] Francis opted for a more radical uncertainty in which the friar depended solely on the grace of God and the generosity of his fellows for his next meal. Francis, the *jongleur de Dieu*, the lover of *chansons de geste* and *romans d’aventure*, embraced both the romance and the potential tragedy of his love in the service of the Lord and the fraternity of his brothers.

The Friars Minor taught by example, not by doctrine. They had little or no formal training. Many of the lay brothers could not even read. Indeed, Francis initially forbade the teaching of theological doctrine within the order. And he chided one of the lay brothers for seeking instruction in reading. He wanted the brothers simply to submit to God and the example of Christ, not to puff themselves up with the pride of learning or to waste time on the niceties of doctrine.

Clare, the daughter of an Assisi nobleman, who had heard Francis preach, extended the movement to include women. She came to the Friars Minor in 1212. She had her hair cut short, and she joined the community as a penitent, resisting the efforts of her family to reclaim her. Clare was soon joined by her two sisters, and other women followed. They became a community of recluses at San Damiano under the authority of the local bishop. Clare, following the lead of Heloise at the Paraclete, drew up a special “form of life” for the Poor (or Lesser) Sisters. She, like Francis, insisted on “the privilege of poverty,” even to the point of embarking on a hunger strike to compel the pope's consent. Francis, too, intervened with Pope Innocent III to allow the Poor Sisters of San Damiano to retain their autonomy, to be free of property, and to depend upon alms gathered by the Friars Minor on their behalf.

In the summer of 1219, Francis traveled to the Holy Land. The Fifth Crusade, which sought and ultimately failed to retake Jerusalem from the Saracens, was underway. Francis had a mission of his own. He was a knight of Christ but no crusader. Francis and two followers

calmly walked across the enemy's line and asked to see the sultan of Egypt, al-Malik al-Kamil. Though Francis was expecting and perhaps even seeking martyrdom, he was treated with utmost respect and care, far better treatment than he had received from his neighbors in Perugia. The sultan and Francis had long conversations, and each man had to give up his preconceptions about the other's beliefs and intentions. Francis could not convert the sultan; nor did he achieve martyrdom. Eventually, the Saracens escorted him back across the lines, and Francis returned to Italy. Aside from the legends that grew from his encounter with the sultan, Francis's only lasting souvenirs were malaria and glaucoma, both of which plagued him for the remainder of his life.

Upon his return in 1220, Francis was dismayed to find his order going in directions he did not approve. Strict dietary and fasting restrictions had been imposed, whereas Francis thought that, aside from Fridays and Lent, the brothers should eat whatever was given to them; social work was given prominence, whereas Francis thought penitence and preaching the gospel were more important; and, perhaps most significant, papal letters of protection for the order had been sought and received, whereas Francis wanted to rely solely on the grace of God.

Asserting his authority was at odds with Francis's humility, but assert it he did in undoing some of the changes made in his absence. Then, in September 1220, Francis announced at a chapter meeting that he was giving up any official position within the organization. He appointed Peter of Cataneo as vicar in his stead. Yet, as long as he lived, regardless who was vicar, the power remained with Francis, who often quite literally whispered instructions in the ear of his vicar before decisions were announced at chapter meetings. Francis did not want to lead actively but rather to set an example of holiness. He devoted himself to penance, fasting, and prayer. He was plagued by demons, as well as by recurrent bouts of malaria and severe eye pain. His health was made worse by the hard conditions in which he lived and the meager food he allowed himself.

The Friars Minor inevitably experienced growing pains as it transformed from a charismatic movement into an institution. Francis sought through various “Rules” he composed for the order to retain what he could of its original inspiration. But he did bow to some inevitable changes, including a probationary period for new brothers and the study and teaching of theology. He was insistent, however, on retaining “the privilege of poverty,” the connection with those who are poor and marginalized, and the deliberate precariousness of the brothers’ daily lives.

On September 14, 1224, at his remote cave hermitage on the

mountain of La Verna, Francis received the stigmata—the wounds in the hands and feet where nails affixed Christ to the cross and the spear thrust in his side that confirmed his death. Many contemporary witnesses attested to these wounds. Historians generally accept their validity, yet how these wounds appeared is a mystery, still sacred to many. *St. Francis in the Desert* (ca. 1480), a beautiful painting by Giovanni Bellini at the Frick Collection in New York, envisions the moment. A deliberate fraud to equate himself with Christ would be wholly out of keeping with Francis's sincerity and humility, though a purely miraculous origin for the wounds seems equally unacceptable. Perhaps Francis, in a trance-like state, sought to humble himself through self-mortification and shared pain.

With his health and eyes continuing to fail, Francis was propelled by his closest followers into a series of medical treatments that would have given torture a bad name. One in particular involved cauterizing his left eye with fire. “Brother Fire,” Francis said with characteristic mildness as the treatment commenced, “God made you beautiful and strong and useful; I pray you be courteous with me.”[13]

In the last months of his life, Francis dictated the “Canticle of Brother Sun” and his testament to the order. In the latter, he sought to restore more of the order's initial simplicity and connection with the gospels of Christ. He died on the 3rd or 4th of October 1226. He was not yet forty-six.

Francis wanted to be buried modestly at the Portiuncula. But he belonged now to the church. Assisi, having once shunned him as a madman, sent armed knights to ensure that his body was not stolen away by another city. His remains are housed in a massive, rich basilica there adorned with frescos by Giotto. Francis was canonized less than two years after his death, on July 16, 1228. After the Holy Land and (perhaps) the Vatican, Assisi is a favored pilgrimage of Christians hoping to recapture something of the spirit of the Poverello and his mission to follow literally the teachings of Christ.

## WRITINGS

Francis was not an intellectual. He had no interest in philosophy and disdained subtlety in church doctrine. Indeed, he considered knowledge itself to be a temptation of the devil. He who seeks knowledge even of the good, Francis wrote, “exalts himself over the good things which the Lord says and does in him; and thus, through the suggestion of the devil and the transgression of the command,

what he eats becomes for him the fruit of the knowledge of evil."[14] Francis saw in scholarship and mastery only "the evil of self-will."[15]

Francis, instead, directed his admonitions and hymns of praise toward three ends: first, to see God in all things; second, to seek Christ in every man, woman, and child; and, third, to serve God with great humility. Francis sought to convey something of his own spirit and to provide guidance for his followers. His writing, like his speech, was simple, even awkward at times, yet infused with intense sincerity and passion.

Francis's "Canticle of Brother Sun," finished a few days before his death, renders luminous the immediate presence of the divine in the natural world. He insisted that all things must be treated with reverence, as a reflection of the divine presence. Even more reverence is due to living creatures and human beings infused with the Holy Spirit. "Look at your dignity, you brothers," Francis urged, "and be holy since He is holy."[16] "Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves so that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally."

Francis authored a series of admonitions and two "Rules" for his order, the first in 1221, and the second, the Rule of 1223, which continued as the Rule of the order after Francis's death. The specifics of each are important, but the overriding thrust of both Rules and his other letters and testaments to the faithful is clear: "we must be simple, humble, and pure."[17]

"The rule and life of these brothers is this," Francis began in 1221: "to live in obedience, in chastity, and without anything of their own, and to follow the teaching and the footprints of our Lord Jesus Christ."[18] Their clothing is to be absolutely basic: two tunics without a hood, a cord and trousers, and a small cape reaching to the cord. The clothes are to be of coarse material and patched, as needed, with sackcloth. Those brothers who can read may have a psalter, but "those who are illiterate should not be eager to learn."[19]

The order must not own any house or other place of abode.[20] Do not make even a hermitage your own, Francis enjoined.[21] "We should be firmly convinced that nothing belongs to us except our vices and sins."[22] The brothers should exist always as pilgrims and strangers. And, as they go about in the world, "they should carry nothing for the journey, neither a knapsack, nor a purse, nor bread, nor money, nor a staff."[23] They may not ride horses or other animals unless compelled by sickness. Above all, "beware of money."[24] "If we were to find coins in any place," Francis urged, "let us give them no more thought than the dust which we crush with our feet."[25]

Francis urged the brothers to do constant penance. "The Spirit of the Lord wishes the flesh to be mortified and despised, worthless and

rejected," he insisted.[26] Otherwise, the devil will take hold and separate us from Christ and eternal life.[27] Yet the brothers should not pass judgment on those who live a softer life; rather "each must criticize and despise himself."[28] Francis established specific times for fasting (before Christmas and Easter). "At other times, however, [the brothers] are not obliged to fast according to this life except on Fridays. And they may eat whatever food is placed before them."[29]

None of the brothers, he wrote, "should…hold power or dominion" over others.[30] But he established "ministers provincial" responsible for receiving new brothers into the order. The ministers may also impose penance on erring brothers, but "they must take care not to become angry or disturbed because of the sin of another, since anger and disturbance hinder charity in themselves and in others."[31]

The brothers "should preach by their deeds," he explained; "let them be meek, peaceful and unassuming, gentle and humble, speaking courteously to everyone, as is becoming," and at the same time "cheerful and truly gracious."[32] The few who have been examined and found qualified may preach openly to the people. But, even then, he cautioned, in words that should be engraved on every pulpit, they should preach only "in a discourse that is brief, because it was in few words that the Lord preached while on earth."[33]

Finally, he enjoined his brothers not to write elaborate interpretations of the Rule: "But as the Lord has granted me to speak and to write the Rule and these words simply and purely, so shall you understand them simply and without gloss, and observe them with their holy manner of working until the end."[34] As he wrote in a prayer shared with the entire order:

> inflamed by the fire of the Holy Spirit,
> may we be able to follow
> in the footprints of Your beloved Son,
> our Lord Jesus Christ.[35]

It was a hard Rule, perhaps an impossible one for any but a saint. Although approved by the pope, it was softened in some respects after Francis's death. Not all the brothers could imitate their founder or follow so faithfully in the footprints of Christ. The order became institutionalized, and monasteries were established. Initially, the church relied on the legal distinction between ownership and use so that the Franciscans could maintain their "privilege of poverty." But they were later given the right to own property outright and to use money to buy goods. Francis would have been horrified.

Yet the spirit of Francis has persisted through the ages as an inspiration and example, and not just for Franciscans or even

Catholics. His story is a constant reminder that Christ ministered to the poor, the sick, and the marginalized. Like Christ, Francis believed his followers "must rejoice when they live among people who are considered to be of little worth and who are looked down upon, among the poor and the powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside."[36] They must find joy not in comfort and success but in rejection and failure.

In his last days on Earth, Francis revealed to his most faithful companion, Brother Leo, the nature of true joy. If messengers arrived to say that all the masters of Paris have joined the order, that is not true joy, he explained. If the king of England and the king of France were to join the order, that is not true joy. If all the nonbelievers were converted to the faith, that is not true joy. "What then is true joy?" Brother Leo asked.[37] Francis responded:

> I return from Perugia and arrive here in the dead of night; and it is winter time, muddy and so cold that icicles have formed on the edges of my habit and keep striking my legs, and blood flows from such wounds. And all covered with mud and cold, I come to the gate and after I have knocked and called for some time, a brother comes and asks: "Who are you?" I answer: "Brother Francis." And he says: "Go away; this is not a proper hour for going about; you may not come in." And when I insist, he answers: "Go away, you are a simple and stupid person; we are so many and we have no need of you. You are certainly not coming to us at this hour!" And I stand again at the door and say: "For the love of God, take me in tonight." And he answers: "I will not. Go to the Crosiers' place and ask there." I tell you this: If I had patience and did not become upset, there would be true joy in this and true virtue and the salvation of the soul.[38]

## AQUINAS

In the eleventh canto of his *Paradiso*, Dante has one of the saints in heaven recount the life of Francis of Assisi. The saint he chooses to deliver that encomium is Thomas Aquinas. It is a fitting choice. Aquinas shared Francis's devotion to poverty and to union with God. Their methods differed, but their goals and the purity and intensity of their pursuits were conjoined. The connection with God sought by Francis was emotional, with his self-abnegation, fasting, and mortification of the flesh. The connection sought by Aquinas was purely intellectual. He wanted to understand the mind of God, which he thought was reflected in all that exists.

Whereas Dante has Aquinas pay tribute to Francis, the entire *Commedia* is a form of tribute to Aquinas. For, as we shall see in the

next chapter, Aquinas provided the theological, metaphysical, psychological, and ethical framework for Dante's journey through hell, purgatory, and paradise. It was Aquinas who created the medieval synthesis, or *summa*, reflected in Dante's great poem, the crowning achievement of the Middle Ages, which combines the emotional intensity of Francis with the intellectual power of Aquinas and the poetic mastery of Virgil.

But we must not treat Aquinas simply as fodder for Dante. He is a towering figure in his own right, whose works warrant more serious study outside theological institutes than they now receive. In canto 11, Dante fittingly looks to Aquinas to dispel his confusion and to satisfy his wonder. Aquinas says to him:

> As I reflect the splendor of His ray,
> gazing into the everlasting light,
> I recognize your thoughts, and whence they rise.
> You waver—you would have me set things right,
> in words so plain and understandable
> they will submit with ease before your sight—39

Reflecting the splendor of God "in words so plain and understandable they will submit with ease before your sight" was indeed Aquinas's sole mission in life. It is sadly ironic that Aquinas is often dismissed unread as the quintessential scholastic philosopher, a man dedicated to logic chopping and angels dancing on the head of a pin. Nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, of all the great philosophers after Aristotle, no one was grounded more firmly in common sense and common understanding; no one made a greater effort to expose all his own assumptions for analysis and to make his arguments as clear as possible.

Aquinas is a challenge to read. His thinking is intricate and condensed, and his works are very, very long. But there is nothing esoteric or elitist about his views. His philosophy and his religion are built on knowledge common to all men. Nor does he subordinate reason to revealed religion. He is simultaneously the most devout and the least dogmatic of the great philosophers. His most fundamental premise is that faith is fully compatible with reason. He therefore pursues reason wherever it leads him, confident that, at the end of the day, it will lead him to God. He relies heavily on the pagan philosophers, especially Aristotle, confident that the Catholic Church has much to learn and nothing to fear from their insights. G. K. Chesterton writes: "St. Thomas did not reconcile Christ to Aristotle; he reconciled Aristotle to Christ."40 There is a certain truth to that, in that Aquinas incorporated Aristotelian thought into a Catholic

framework without in any way compromising that framework. But, in Aquinas's view, neither Aristotle nor Christ needs reconciling. His Catholic framework is catholic in the derivative sense that it can embrace all fields of knowledge without apology or concern. Thomism, as the teachings of Thomas Aquinas became known, need never distort or deny knowledge to make way for faith; it can embrace evolutionary biology, astrophysics, and the latest developments in neuroscience without missing a beat. The one thing Aquinas cannot and will not accept is that our lives have no higher meaning or purpose and that the universe is but the chance interaction of atoms in the void. On that basic article of faith, his entire edifice ultimately rests.

## LIFE

The life of Aquinas was largely occupied with study, teaching, and writing. As Chesterton notes, Aquinas "did not, like St. Francis, disappear in a shower of personal anecdotes and popular legends."[41] Yet a few of the anecdotes that have survived are highly revealing of his character.

Tommaso d'Aquino was born in late 1224 or early 1225 at the family castle at Roccasecca, near Naples. He was the youngest of nine children and consequently, by tradition, destined for the church. His parents accordingly enrolled him before his sixth birthday at the nearby Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino (made famous in modern times by the fierce fighting that largely destroyed it during the Allied invasion in 1944). Tommaso, who arrived at the abbey with his own nursemaid, became, in the Latin of the Catholic Church, Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas's family was connected with the nobility throughout western Europe. Indeed, his cousin, Frederick II, was the Holy Roman emperor. The family castle at Roccasecca and their nearby estates at Aquino lay in territory contested by the pope and the emperor. For obvious reasons, the Aquino family sided largely with their relative, the emperor. Their eldest son, Aimo, even joined the emperor for the Sixth Crusade, which retook the Holy Land in 1229. Frederick II's troops occupied Monte Cassino in 1239, about the same time that Aquinas was transferred to Naples for further study. There, he encountered the works of Aristotle, whose natural philosophy was still banned at many church universities. He also read the Jewish scholar, Moses Maimonides (1135–1204), and the Muslim Aristotelian named

Ibn Sīnā, known in the West as Avicenna (980–1037). All his life, Aquinas would learn what he could from Greek, Jewish, and Muslim philosophers and theologians, while nonetheless adhering to his Catholic faith.

In Naples, Aquinas began to consort with a group of Dominican friars. The order was founded by Saint Dominic in 1216. Like the Franciscans, they were mendicants, meaning that they took strict vows of poverty and eschewed any fixed abode or formal structure. Unlike the Franciscans, however, they were dedicated to study and teaching. The Dominicans were at the cutting edge of learning. This combination of piety and knowledge proved irresistible to the young Aquinas, and he joined the order at the age of eighteen or nineteen.

His parents were not pleased. Given their wealth and influence, they expected Aquinas one day to be the abbot at Monte Cassino, not a penniless, vagabond friar. The Dominicans, thrilled with their brilliant and well-connected recruit, sought to move him quickly outside his parents' reach—but not quickly enough. His brothers, serving in the emperor's forces, were sent to kidnap him on the road to Rome. Aquinas was kept a virtual prisoner at the family castle for over a year.

He did not seem to mind. Aquinas used the time for intense study. One night his brothers introduced a prostitute into his room in hopes of tempting him away from his Dominican vows. Aquinas snatched up a brand from the fire and chased her from the room. He bolted the door after her, emblazoned the sign of the cross on it with the red-hot stick, and then knelt in prayer and implored God to preserve his chastity.

His parents finally relented and allowed Aquinas to return to the Dominicans. They did so in part because he showed no signs of relenting and in part because the political winds were shifting away from the emperor and in favor of the pope, and the family wanted an ally in the church. Contrary to popular legend, Aquinas did not escape from the castle by being lowered from an upper-story window in a basket provided by his sisters—an unlikely scenario in any event given his considerable bulk.

Aquinas was sent by the Dominicans to Paris in 1245 to study with Albertus Magnus (Albert the Great), the most renowned scholar of his day. Aquinas was a large and heavy youth, mild in temper, generous, gentle, and considerate. He was also shy and often distracted and so stolid that his fellow students called him "the dumb ox." One such student took pity on him and sought to teach him some of the more esoteric principles of logic. Aquinas listened placidly until the student became stuck on a particularly knotty problem. Somewhat

embarrassed but valuing truth more than humility, Aquinas proceeded to show him the correct solution. Albert himself was never deceived by Aquinas's reserve, telling the class, “We call him the Dumb Ox, but the bellowing of that ox will resound throughout the whole world.”[42]

Albert took his prize pupil with him to Cologne in 1248. There, Aquinas functioned as Albert's assistant instructor until 1252, when Aquinas returned to Paris and received his doctorate in 1256. As master of theology—an appointment that, by statute, he was technically too young to receive—Aquinas taught there until he completed his term and returned to Naples in 1259. The Dominicans, in keeping with their mendicant tradition, moved scholars regularly from city to city. Aquinas taught at Orvieto from 1261 to 1265. After that, he was sent to Rome to set up a house of study for friars at Santa Sabina, the headquarters of the Dominican Order. But Santa Sabina was sacked in 1268 by the troops of Frederick II's grandson, and Aquinas returned to Paris, where he remained until 1272 before finally settling back in Naples.

While in Paris, Aquinas entered into the raging controversy over the works of Aristotle. Several of Aristotle's logical writings were well known and highly regarded throughout the Middle Ages. As we saw, Boethius and Abelard studied them with great care. But Aristotle's natural philosophy (especially his writings on physics, metaphysics, and ethics) was largely unknown in western Europe until the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Once those works became available in Latin translations, they attracted great attention and controversy. Teaching of Aristotle's works on natural philosophy was actually prohibited by a Church council in 1210. Yet the prohibition was largely ignored by the 1240s, and in 1255 a statute of the Paris Arts Faculty actually required the study of all of Aristotle's major works. Aquinas's teacher Albert was a leading figure in the revival of Aristotle. Aquinas, too, was firmly on the side of those who wanted to use Aristotle in the articulation and defense of Christianity. He wrote detailed commentaries on all of Aristotle's works and incorporated Aristotle's philosophical ideas into his theology.

This shift to Aristotle was simultaneously a move away from the Neoplatonism of the church fathers, such as Augustine. One might even say that the rediscovery of Aristotle rescued Christianity from Neoplatonism, which had exhausted itself in ever more esoteric and ungrounded speculation. Neoplatonism emphasized the Word and ignored the world; the new Aristotelian approach focused on the Word made flesh.[43] Aquinas in particular accepted and embraced the created world as a direct reflection of God's goodness. He never turned from it or otherwise disavowed it. As a result, he not only celebrates life and being but is open to and embraces all advances in scientific

knowledge as providing ever greater insight into the mind of God.

Aquinas was deeply pious. All his activities—study, teaching, writing, preaching—were directed toward this greater knowledge and understanding of God. He had no interest in money, title, or power over others. He spent as little time as possible eating and sleeping, viewing any time not spent on God as wasted. Whenever the conversation strayed from God, he would leave the room. Whenever he was not reading or writing, he walked around the cloisters at a furious pace, lost in thought. Aquinas was so totally absorbed in matters divine that the Dominicans assigned him a minder to keep him from accidents and to ensure he had proper nourishment.

In a famous anecdote, Aquinas was at a large dinner with Louis IX, king of France and the future Saint Louis. Aquinas did not participate in the general conversation and became increasingly distracted until suddenly he pounded the table with his fist and shouted, "And *that* will settle the Manichees!"[44] Louis turned to his secretaries and quietly directed them to take dictation from Aquinas so that whatever argument he had just developed would not be lost.

Aquinas never wrote a memoir, in the fashion of Augustine, Boethius, Abelard, and even Francis, all of whom used their lives as exemplars, if only in a cautionary vein. There is no direct element of the self in any of his writings. We have no personal correspondence. He was absorbed wholly in his search for God. He wanted, literally, to lose himself in his work, often writing an astonishing four thousand words per day. That was his form of worship.

## WRITINGS

Aquinas wrote lengthy volumes of biblical exegesis and detailed commentaries on all the major works of Aristotle, along with other philosophical and theological works. He is best known, however, for his *Summa Theologica*. Even today, new converts may begin their exploration of church doctrine by reading and rereading the *Summa*, as my own father did when he married my Catholic mother in 1945. The writer Flannery O'Connor kept a copy on her bedside table and read in it every night.[45] Aquinas himself said it was written for the "instruction of beginners,"[46] but it is also a master class for more serious students of religion and philosophy.

We think of Aquinas today as the embodiment of Catholic doctrine: fixed and immutable. In fact, he was highly controversial during his life and for centuries afterward. Some of his teachings (on

grace, predestination, the unity of the rational soul and the human body, and the lack of any immaculate conception) were posthumously condemned as heretical. His heavy reliance on pre-Christian philosophers, as well as Muslim and Jewish scholars, was also viewed with skepticism. It was not until the late nineteenth century that he came back into favor as a philosophical bulwark against modern relativism. Pope Leo XIII (r. 1878–1903) exhorted his fellow bishops in 1879 "to restore the golden wisdom of St. Thomas and to spread it far and wide for the defense and beauty of the Catholic faith, for the good of society, and for the advantage of all the sciences."[47] Thomism thus became orthodoxy.

The *Summa* appears more forbidding than it actually is. The style is dry, direct, and precise, but—while many of the ideas are intricate and require intense concentration—beautiful in its clarity. There are no rhetorical flourishes or interjections of the personal. He presents pure argumentation in a back-and-forth dialogue mirroring the formal *disputatio* practiced in the schools.

The work is structured around what Aquinas calls "Questions," but are more in the nature of topic headings, such as "The Nature and Extent of Sacred Doctrine," "The Existence of God," and "How God Is Known by Us." Under each Question are "Articles," stated in the form of questions with a "yes" or "no" answer: "Whether, besides Philosophy, Any Further Doctrine Is Required?" "Whether the Existence of God Is Self-Evident?" and "Whether Any Created Intellect Can See the Essence of God?" After setting forth an Article, Aquinas lists a series of "Objections," generally two or more, introduced by "It seems…" These "Objections" are not in any sense straw men but rather are Aquinas's best effort to state as persuasively, if compactly, as possible the most serious obstacles to what he wants to argue.

Aquinas then gives the scriptural reason for rejecting the Objections in a passage introduced with *Sed contra* ("On the contrary"). After the *Sed contra* comes Aquinas's philosophical argument in favor of what he considers to be the scripturally correct position. It always begins with *Respondeo dicens* ("I answer that…"). Sometimes the answer is just a long paragraph; other times, as in the arguments for the existence of God, it is more extended but still highly concentrated. The *Respondeo dicens* is followed by specific "Replies" to each of the Objections. Aquinas then deals with the next Article in the same five-part format.

The number of Articles per Question varies from two to more than a dozen. The *Summa* contains a total of 612 Questions and 3,120 Articles. The Questions themselves are grouped into "Treatises," which demark even broader topic areas. The Treatises in turn are gathered into "Parts." Part 1 deals, *inter alia*, with the existence and nature of

God, the creation, and the nature and purpose of man. Part 2 is itself broken into two subparts: general principles of morality and law, and the specific treatment of virtues and vices. Part 3, which Aquinas left unfinished, deals with Christ, the sacraments, and the end of the world. The work thus has a circular structure, starting with God and then proceeding through the creation of the world, the nature and purpose of man, and the return to God of man through the intercession of Christ and the sacraments.

The five-volume edition of the Dominican fathers contains more than three thousand pages. We cannot even begin to survey the whole, though simply scanning the table of contents in each of the five volumes gives a vivid sense of its scope. Instead, we will focus briefly on just four Articles that are particularly important in the overall thrust of Aquinas's synthesis.

## WHETHER, BESIDES PHILOSOPHY, ANY FURTHER DOCTRINE IS REQUIRED?[48]

The *Summa* consists largely of philosophical arguments whose validity can be judged by believers and nonbelievers alike. Aquinas himself believes that we can know a great deal about God through the exercise of reason alone. He accordingly draws on arguments from pagan philosophy to establish the existence and nature of God.

At the same time, he admits that “a little old lady of today knows more about things concerning the faith than all the philosophers of antiquity.”[49] That is because the little old lady has the benefit of the Bible and, in particular, the New Testament, which Aquinas thinks is necessary for man's salvation. Natural theology is not enough for man to understand God, because God “surpasses the grasp of [man's] reason.” “Hence it was necessary for the salvation of man that certain truths which exceed human reason should be made known to him by divine revelation.”[50]

Divinely inspired scripture is always a trump card of sorts in the *Summa*, as well as the starting point of each *Sed contra*. But it is a card that Aquinas plays with care and never without explicit acknowledgment. He wants to get as close as he can to knowledge of God through philosophical reasoning alone, and only then to supplement that reasoning with scriptural revelation, which “differs in kind from that theology which is part of philosophy.”[51] We can approach God in both ways, but Aquinas is very careful to keep them intellectually distinct. Both lead toward the same place. But certain

things can be known by revelation (the Trinity, grace, salvation) that cannot be reached by natural theology. At the same time, natural theology both grounds and deepens our understanding of what is revealed to us in scripture. We therefore need both philosophical science and sacred science (the study of the scriptures) in order to gain as full an understanding of God and his plan for us as is attainable in this life.

But, of course, God “exceeds every kind of knowledge,”[52] so that, while we can know God in some respects, “it is impossible for any created intellect to comprehend God.”[53] By definition, then, Aquinas's undertaking is doomed to failure. He wants to bring natural theology as close to scriptural revelation as possible, knowing that he can never fully succeed. Moreover, he acknowledges that even scriptural revelation, which necessarily proceeds by analogy, will not give us direct knowledge of God. Our knowledge is bound by the limitations of language, which derives from the exercise of intellect on sense experience, a point previously stressed by Augustine. The language of scripture, though divinely inspired, can only gesture in the right direction. “God cannot be seen in His essence by a mere human being, except he be separated from this mortal life.”[54]

Thus, Aquinas accepts at the outset of his life's work that he can bridge neither the gap between natural theology and divine revelation nor the even greater gap between man's understanding and the reality of God. Yet still he struggled mightily to develop a comprehensive, systematic, and unified theology, an undertaking he saw as man's highest task on Earth and the closest he can come to beatitude.

## WHETHER GOD EXISTS?[55]

Aquinas famously states that “the existence of God can be proved in five ways.”[56] These five ways have been discussed and analyzed endlessly, sometimes accepted, just as often rejected, but never bettered. They will not convince a confirmed atheist or sway a settled agnostic. But, if one is going to believe in the existence of God on purely intellectual grounds, it will be for these reasons. Of course, Aquinas does not think that we believe in the existence of God on purely intellectual grounds. Rather, he claims that “to know that God exists in a general and confused way is implanted in us by nature.”[57] His “five ways” are designed to solidify and clarify this innate faith, not to manufacture it out of whole cloth.

Aquinas begins by rejecting the so-called ontological argument, made by Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), that the existence of God is self-evident because our concept of God contains every perfection, and God would be less than perfect if he did not exist. In other words, Anselm argues that God exists because his essential nature includes existence. Aquinas rejects the argument on the grounds that essence does not guarantee existence. The statement "God does not exist" is not a contradiction in terms; one can understand the statement and still affirm it, whereas one could not affirm the sentence "Red is not a color" if one understood the terms.

Aquinas's five ways are not ontological but cosmological. He starts from the visible world and infers God's existence from that. We know God indirectly, in contemplation of creation, as the source of all that exists. The first three ways focus on motion, causation, and contingency, respectively. But the argument is essentially the same in each case. Through our senses we experience in nature that some things are in motion, that there is an order of cause and effect, and that there are contingent things (i.e., things that are possible to be and not to be). But whatever is in motion is put in motion by something else; each effect has an efficient cause; and any contingent thing is brought into existence by something else. "But this cannot go on to infinity, because then there would be no first mover," or "first efficient cause," or necessary (i.e., noncontingent) being.[58] Without a first mover, nothing would be in motion; without a first efficient cause, there would be no effects; and, without a necessary being, there would be no contingent things at all. To this first mover, first cause, and necessary being, Aquinas concludes, we give the name of God.

The fourth way is based on gradation. It is similar to the first three but also slightly more like Anselm's ontological argument, and less convincing on that account. "Among beings there are some more and some less good, true, noble, and the like."[59] We can only use such terms of gradation insofar as the things in question more or less resemble something which is the maximum of each of these qualities and forms a basis for comparison. "Therefore there must also be something which is to all beings the cause of their being, goodness, and every other perfection; and this we call God."[60]

The fifth way is generally known, somewhat misleadingly, as the argument from design. All things, even physical objects, act for an end as part of an orderly system. They serve as efficient causes in regular ways. Aquinas, following Aristotle, sees this causal regularity as teleological (i.e., purposive), as serving the end of making the universe itself intelligible. That is, efficient causes are only intelligible in terms of final causes, and the ultimate final cause (as well as the ultimate first cause) is God. "Therefore some intelligent being exists

by whom all natural things are directed to their end; and this being we call God."[61]

It is important to recognize that Aquinas is not contending the universe is such an intricate mechanism that some being must have put it together, wound it up, and set it in motion on day one. He rejects such a mechanistic view of nature, which would make God irrelevant after the initial act of creation. Indeed, Aquinas says that we cannot know if the world has always existed or was brought into existence at a specific time.[62] That the world had a beginning is a matter of faith rather than reason. Even his arguments based on motion, causation, and possibility are not designed to demonstrate that the universe had a beginning in time. Rather, all five ways are directed to showing that we cannot make sense of the world, as it is today, without accepting God as the sustaining source and order of all that exists. Chesterton probably summarized all five ways most succinctly: "Things change because they are not complete; but their reality can only be explained as part of something that is complete. It is God."[63] God is the source of all material things. God is the unmoved mover, the uncaused cause, the necessary being, the source of ultimate goodness, and the intelligent first principle.

## WHETHER GOD IS THE FINAL CAUSE OF ALL THINGS?[64]

Without God, Aquinas insists, nothing makes sense. Yet the universe does make sense, and we experience its purpose, its structure, and its meaning. Marcus Aurelius set up the same dichotomy in his *Meditations*: "Either the world is a mere hotchpotch of random cohesions and dispersions, or else it is a unity of order and providence."[65] Although Marcus himself favored the latter view, he thought it made no difference in how we should lead our lives. For Aquinas, however, the choice makes every difference in how we think about the world and our place within it.

Aquinas, like Aristotle, believes that we experience the world in terms of final causes. That is, we look to the purpose or end of each thing. "Every agent acts for an end: otherwise one thing would not follow more than another from the action of the agent, unless it were by chance."[66] But things do not follow by chance; they follow laws. With Aristotle, Aquinas thought we can best understand and articulate those laws in teleological terms. Things have a purpose and are to be understood in terms of their purpose. It is the nature of smoke to rise;

of heat to warm; of water to quench thirst; of arms to carry; of legs to bear weight and propel us forward. We understand the place of things in the world in terms of their final causes. And, for Aquinas, as for Aristotle, the chain of final causes has an end in God, the origin *and* the goal of all that exists.[67]

The language of "final causes" has been rendered at best quaint by modern science (though it is hard to eradicate in evolutionary biology). It is important to recognize, however, that Aquinas is not imposing a religious straitjacket on science. His view of final causes, and of God as the final cause of all things, does not compromise reason or science in the service of faith. It does not preclude explanations solely in terms of efficient causes (which can be described mechanistically, as an object changes motion if struck by another object). To the contrary, he insists that finite things are real and have a separate existence that is to be articulated in rational and scientific terms based on the observations of the senses.

But he also thinks that scientific and rational explanations naturally lead us to think about the world in teleological (and hence theological) terms. Our minds naturally are equipped to pass beyond efficient causes to final causes, beyond mechanistic explanations to the purpose and meaning in all that exists. Ultimately, Aquinas believes, we can find that purpose and meaning only in what we call God. The existence of such purpose and meaning is a matter of innate faith, but it is strengthened and expanded through rational inquiry.

For Aquinas, "God is the essentially self-subsisting Being," the ultimate perfection in which all other beings participate to a greater or lesser extent.[68] We can, therefore, best understand the world as a chain of being from lowest to highest insofar as each thing shares in the perfection that is God and desires God as its end, "whether this desire be intellectual or sensible, or natural, *i.e.*, without knowledge; because nothing is good and desirable except forasmuch as it participates in the likeness to God."[69] Material objects follow natural laws. Animals have a sensible and animate existence. But man, through his intellect, participates most closely in the likeness of God.

One need not, of course, accept Aquinas's leap from natural laws to the great chain of being. But it is hard to dispute his contention that we do not experience the world as "a mere hotchpotch of random cohesions and dispersions." As Einstein said, "The most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is at all comprehensible."[70] For Aquinas, that "most incomprehensible thing," which gives order to everything else, is what we call God.

## WHETHER MAN'S HAPPINESS CONSISTS IN THE VISION OF THE DIVINE ESSENCE?[71]

Since there is a divine order, Aquinas concludes, men and women must have a specific place in that order and a specific purpose to fulfill in their lives. To determine that place and that purpose, Aquinas follows Aristotle in looking to what makes men and women peculiarly human and therefore distinct from other living things. A plant can take in nutrition and can grow and reproduce. An animal, in addition, enjoys sensation and locomotion. A man or a woman has all those things and more: specifically, intellect and will. A human being can reason and make free choices, rather than acting purely on instinct or blind desire. Human beings are thus the highest of created things. They are pulled by their bodies toward earth and yet are capable of directing their thoughts and their desires toward God.

Our actions are purposive. We do things for reasons: "the most basic act of willing is the desiring of what is in itself desirable, namely goals or ends."[72] Thus, we might study hard to get a good grade on a test, in order to get into a good college, in order to get a good job, in order to raise a family, in order…and so on. The list cannot go on indefinitely, however. There must be something we do for its own sake, something which is the end of all our actions. Aristotle called that something *eudaimonia*, which is usually translated as "happiness." Aquinas, following Aristotle, considers and rejects all the usual candidates for the final end of man: wealth, honors, fame, power, pleasure, even friendship. He does not disparage those goods. To the contrary, Aquinas recognizes their value as features of a full and rich life. But they are intermediate goods rather than ends in themselves. We seek these intermediate goods in order to be happy, but "man is not perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek."[73] There must, then, be a final good, a good that encompasses and eclipses all others.

In what does this true happiness consist? Aristotle believed that it consists in the exercise of our reasoning faculty. Aristotle taught that the life of the philosopher seeking truth was the happiest life and the most godlike. Aquinas concurs, but with a twist. He agrees that the highest happiness lies in contemplation of truth and the pursuit of wisdom, but those pursuits merge in his mind into the contemplation and love of God. Man has a purpose, and that purpose is union with God. "Final and perfect happiness," he concludes, "can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence."[74]

Aquinas's view of human happiness as a union with God is, in the end, similar to that of Francis. Both found wisdom in the

contemplation of the eternal. Their modes of contemplation were very different, yet Aquinas had his own direct encounter with the divine. It was not as dramatic, perhaps, as the stigmata of Francis, but it was striking enough in its own way.

On December 6, 1273, while serving mass in Naples, Aquinas had a mystical experience. Characteristically, he was silent about the exact nature of the experience. It might have been a nervous breakdown brought on by overwork. But he experienced it as a religious vision, the direct connection with God he had always sought indirectly and imperfectly in his writing. “Everything I have written,” he told a brother friar, “seems to me as straw in comparison with what I have seen.”[75] He stopped writing, leaving his *Summa Theologica* unfinished. He had finally, in his own life, closed the gap he knew he could not close in his writing—that between the “unknown god” of philosophy and the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There was simply nothing left for him to say.

Soon thereafter, Aquinas was asked to attend a church council at Lyons. On the way, he absentmindedly struck his head on a tree branch. He was carried from there to a Cistercian abbey at Fossanova, where he died shortly thereafter on March 7, 1274, at the age of forty-nine, almost fifty years after the death of Francis.

Francis and Aquinas were the two towering figures of the medieval church. They shared a vision most of us can no longer accept or perhaps even fully understand. Yet it is a beautiful vision, in which everything has a place and a purpose, and in which the contemplation of truth and wisdom is man's highest and best pursuit. That is also the vision animating the greatest of all medieval works, Dante's *Commedia*.

# CHAPTER 8

# DANTE AND THE *COMMEDIA*

> *Dante and Shakespeare divide the modern world between them; there is no third.*
>
> —T. S. Eliot[1]

Dante's *Commedia* is often viewed as the culmination, perfection, and ossification of the medieval worldview. It is his *summa* in verse, his attempt to take all the best elements of pagan and Christian thought and to weave them together into a harmonious, Thomistic whole, in which every literary, moral, political, philosophical, cosmological, and theological element has its proper place. It is the medieval synthesis par excellence or, as C. S. Lewis wistfully put it, the discarded image, a beautiful and coherent dream vision to which the modern world has given the lie.[2]

Yet that is only part of the story, and far from the most interesting part. If it were the whole story, then Dante would be of interest mainly to antiquarians and to those Catholics seeking a nostalgic reconstruction of a bygone, Gothic faith. But there is a reason Eliot said that Dante and Shakespeare divide the *modern* world between them; that the great critic Erich Auerbach subtitled his book on Dante, "Poet of the Secular World"; that the Victorian art critic John Ruskin called him "the central man of all the world"; and that William Anderson, his most important recent biographer, claimed simply that Dante "invented modern literature."[3]

Dante occupies a central position in literary history. He is the pivot point from ancient and medieval literature to a modern,

realistic, and naturalistic portrayal of characters embedded in a particular time and place. As Auerbach explains, Dante is the first writer to present man

> not as a remote legendary hero, not as an abstract or anecdotal representative of an ethical type, but man as we know him in his living historical reality, the concrete individual in his unity and wholeness; and in that he has been followed by all subsequent portrayers of man, regardless of whether they treated a historical or a mythical or a religious subject, for after Dante myth and legend also become history.[4]

From Homer to the *Song of Roland*, we learn important truths about ourselves and the human capacity for good and evil from the portrayal of legendary figures in extraordinary circumstances. Yet these figures are remote from our everyday lives, and their stories are presented in a high, tragic style that elevates and isolates them. Dante took people from his own period, sometimes people he knew personally, others of whom he had only heard or met briefly, and presented them in the straightforward, everyday language of his native Tuscany. He also mingled them with historical, legendary, and mythical figures who tell their stories in equally direct and compelling ways.

The characters in Dante—particularly those in the *Inferno*—are distilled to their essence in the speeches they make to Dante the pilgrim and in their placement and posture in the hell or heaven of their own devising; yet they never lose their unique individuality. Their speeches constitute some of the most stirring and often disturbing self-portraits ever fashioned, and it is not an exaggeration to trace back to them the soliloquies of Shakespeare, the lyric poetry of Eliot, the stream of consciousness of Joyce, and, for good and ill, the modern confessional memoir. Yet they transcend all of those in what Eliot called the “direct shock of poetic intensity.”[5]

The *Commedia* is Dante's catalogue of human life and experience, from the deepest degradation to the highest beatitude. He maps that experience within the order of the universe, the great chain of being sketched by Plato and Aristotle and developed scholastically by Thomas Aquinas. The moral taxonomy, the philosophical, cosmological, and theological speculation, and the highly developed allegories are all important to understanding Dante's full accomplishment. But they are decidedly secondary to the portrayals of individual men and women. We can and should read Dante first and foremost as a poet of the human condition. As we struggle with ambivalence and confusion in our own lives, strive to form judgments about the proper course of action, and decide what is most important

to us, Dante the poet as pilgrim is our invaluable companion.

## THE *VITA NUOVA*

Dante Alighieri was born in Florence in late May 1265. His family was aristocratic but not wealthy. Their primary income came from rental properties outside the city—farmlands, vineyards, and olive groves—supplemented by moneylending. Dante received a basic education and learned to read and write Latin. His mother, Gabriella, died in 1272, when he was only seven years old. His father remarried, and Dante and his full sister soon shared the household with three half siblings.

The premature death of his mother may have made Dante especially susceptible to early attachments. On May 1, 1274, he was invited to a May Day party at the home of his wealthy and philanthropic neighbor, Folco Portinari. There he set his eyes for the first time upon the eight-year-old Beatrice Portinari, known to her friends and family as Bice. She was wearing a crimson dress, and Dante was immediately and deeply smitten. As he later wrote, “From that time on Love governed my soul.”[6] Throughout his life, Beatrice would be for him the embodiment of human love even as she was gradually transformed in his mind and in his writing into an allegory of the divine.

In that age, however, marriage had nothing to do with love. Marriages were arranged by parents, not chosen by children. Dante was formally engaged before his twelfth birthday to Gemma Donati, a distant cousin of one of the most important Florentine families. Eight years later, in 1285, the formal ceremony took place. Dante never mentions his wife in his writings. Yet it seems to have been a contented marriage, and they had four children.

Dante's father died in the early 1280s. Though still in his teens, Dante became the head of the household, responsible for his stepmother and four siblings and, soon thereafter, for a wife and children of his own. Expenses always seemed to outstrip their modest rental income, and Dante was forced on more than one occasion to borrow from his wife's family. Frankly, he had little interest in business. His passions were poetry and politics, which proved a dangerous mix.

The poetry that captured Dante's attention was the *dolce stil nuovo*, or “sweet new style,” derived from the Provençal troubadour poets. Guido Guinizelli (ca. 1230–1276) in Bologna and Guido Cavalcanti

(ca. 1250–1300) in Florence were his models and mentors, although he soon surpassed them both. Their poetry was focused on love—in Guinizelli's case, sentimentalized; in Calvacanti's, as a source of bitterness and pain. The sweet new style is perhaps most evident in *Al cor gentil*, Guinizelli's canzone (a short song in praise of love), which begins:

> Love ever dwells within the gentle heart,
> As the bird seeks the green leaves of the woods,
> And Nature never made the one before
> The other, neither gentle heart, nor Love.[7]

Dante himself adopted the style in a series of poems he later collected in his first book, the *Vita Nuova* ("New Life"). How much of the *Vita Nuova* fits our definition of biography and how much is a fictionalized reimagining of his experience is impossible to determine. The poems were written over a span of years. But the book, which intersperses the poems with prose passages designed to provide a context for and explication of the poems, was prepared much later. The book is thus an autobiographical record of Dante's creative growth as a young poet,[8] although the prose does not always fit the poems. Indeed, through his prose accompaniments, Dante tries to make these youthful poems seem better and weightier than they are and to squeeze them into a compelling narrative that they do not always support.

Dante begins, of course, with his first sight of Beatrice, when Love spoke to him: "Now your bliss has appeared."[9] He sought her out whenever possible—in the street, at church, in the marketplace—and found her always full of natural dignity. Then one day, in his eighteenth year, when she was standing dressed all in white between two ladies, she turned her eyes on him and, Dante writes, "greeted me so miraculously that I felt I was experiencing the very summit of bliss."[10] From then on he lived for that greeting, asking no more of his love than that. Yet his evident affection for Beatrice occasioned talk. Dante claims that he accordingly devised a "screen," another lady to whom he directed his attention so that no one would suspect his love of Beatrice.

This "screen" developed by happenstance, since one day in church "a worthy lady of very pleasing aspect" sat directly between Dante and Beatrice.[11] When he gazed at Beatrice, the worthy lady thought the glances were directed at her and responded in kind. And when others remarked upon the apparently mutual esteem, Dante resolved to make this lady his screen. "So well did I play my part," he insists,

that others quickly thought him in love with the lady.[12] This charade went on for several years, and Dante even included the "worthy lady" in his poems of praise. And when that lady finally left town, Dante confessed himself "very dejected" and, ostensibly to continue the pretense, wrote more than one sonnet on his grief.[13]

Yet he promptly found a substitute screen and "made her so completely my defense" that he excited much comment, and Beatrice withheld her greeting from him.[14] He claims she did so because he damaged the other woman's reputation. But we are justified in seeing a certain amount of jealousy in her rebuke; the alleged screens undoubtedly appeared to her, as they did to others, in the guise of rival loves. Dante wrote several ballads—first exculpatory, then pleading, and then disconsolate—but it did little good. Beatrice would no longer greet him, and all his bliss was gone.

Only then did Dante come to the realization that his love for Beatrice was not dependent upon possession or even the greeting of the loved one. He was to find his bliss in praise alone, in the act of writing poetry. Thus begins his *vita nuova* and his breakthrough as a poet in *Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore* ("Ladies who have knowledge of love"). In that canzone, the expression of his love is an end in itself, and the perfection of that expression is the source of his greatest happiness. Beatrice herself is an increasingly allegorical figure in his poems—an embodiment of divine love and grace—rather than an object of specific desire.

Beatrice married in late 1287 but died in 1290 at the age of only twenty-four. Dante was bereft and inconsolable. Yet he found consolation regardless. Standing in a place that recalled past times, his grief overflowing, he writes, "I saw a gracious lady, young and very beautiful, who was at a window looking down at me so compassionately…that it seemed all pity was concentrated in her."[15] He visited her often and wrote sonnets to praise her. Feelings of guilt and disloyalty could not overcome his infatuation, for, he explains, "my eyes began to delight too much in seeing her."[16] He was saved finally from the infidelity of his regard by a miraculous vision of the young Beatrice in her crimson garments, and all his thoughts turned back to his first love.

Following the death of Beatrice, Dante began a deep study of theology and philosophy and the Latin classics, especially Virgil, Horace, Ovid, and the now more obscure Statius. He received formal training from the Dominicans and frequented the Franciscan preachers in Florence. But his most important teacher was Brunetto Latini, a scholar, philosopher, and politician whom Dante deeply admired. (Dante will meet Brunetto in hell and greet him with the plaintive but gentle words, "Ser Brunetto, are *you* here?"[17]) These studies ignited in

Dante a passion to make sense of the entire universe. Yet he always returned to Beatrice and to love as the center, the goal, and the most ennobling feature of life. Love became for him a mystical experience, the source not just of all poetic inspiration but also of direct insight into the divine nature that orders all things.

At the end of the *Vita Nuova*, Dante resolves to say no more about his blessed Beatrice until he is capable of treating the subject more fully and "in a more worthy fashion."[18] He must evolve beyond the *dolce stil nuovo* to a mature poetry in which love and wisdom merge in an understanding of the divine plan. Dante would take the Provençal theme of courtly love and make it transcendent. "I hope to write of her that which has never been written of any other woman," he concludes.[19] He would come to realize his hope but not without great pain and struggle.

## POLITICS AND EXILE

Politics in Florence, and indeed in many of the Italian city-states of this era, was a blood sport. Florence suffered from the same division between Guelfs (who favored the claims of the pope) and Ghibellines (who favored the Holy Roman emperor) that divided Assisi. In Florence, the division was further fueled by personal, family, and class animosity, as well as by rivalry with other city-states. Matters began to get out of hand in 1215 when a young dandy, Buondelmonte dei Buondelmonti, jilted the daughter of one prominent family (associated with the Ghibellines) in order to marry a girl in the Donati family (associated with the Guelfs). Soon thereafter, dressed all in white, Buondelmonte was clubbed from his white horse and stabbed to death as he rode off the Ponte Vecchio on the way to his wedding. Machiavelli would later write that, from the ensuing strife, "there resulted more murders, banishments, and destruction of families than ever in any city known to history."[20]

The Ghibellines ousted the Guelfs from Florence in 1248, only to have them return in 1251, after the death of the emperor, Frederick II. The leading Ghibelline families were gradually driven out after years of civil strife, but in 1260 they, along with their allies from Sienna, won a decisive and bloody victory over the Guelfs at the Battle of Montaperti. That triumph, too, was short-lived, however. The Guelfs regained control of the city in 1267 with the help of the French cavalry of Charles of Anjou, and the Ghibellines again were forced into exile. They slowly rallied but were routed for good at the Battle

of Campaldino in 1289, in which Dante participated as a cavalryman on the side of the Guelfs. With the Ghibellines no longer posing a threat, however, the Guelfs soon fell to quarreling among themselves.

Florence was a commune, a self-governing independent city-state. It was the second most populous city in Europe after Paris, grown wealthy through textiles and banking. In 1282, the *popolo*—the merchants and other well-to-do bourgeoisie who fueled and benefited from this growing wealth—finally made common cause against the warring nobles and excluded them from the governance of the commune. Only guild members were permitted to hold office, whether from the major merchant guilds or the minor artisan guilds.

Dante entered politics in 1295, after joining the guild for physicians and apothecaries, which was considered suitable for poets and philosophers. He rose rapidly in both position and reputation and, in 1300, became one of the six governing magistrates, or "priors," of Florence. The priors faced two critical and related challenges.

First, two of the city's most prominent Guelf families, the Donatis and the de Cerchis, were feuding. Their disputes erupted in a street brawl, in which a young de Cerchi boy had his nose sliced off. The Florentine nobility quickly chose sides, and civil war erupted once again. The de Cerchis and their allies were known as the Whites; the Donatis and their allies were the Blacks. As noted above, Dante was related to the Donatis by marriage, yet he considered himself a White Guelf.

At Dante's urgings, the priors banished several members of both families to try to restore peace. These included the powerful Corso Donati, Dante's wife's cousin, and Guido Cavalcanti, Dante's close friend and poetic mentor. The banishments might have calmed matters but for the second issue. Pope Boniface VIII was trying to extend papal influence into Tuscany and made several attempts to control Florence. Dante strenuously resisted these efforts. The frustrated Boniface invited the French king, Charles of Valois, to enter Italy. Charles duly made plans to invade Florence. Dante was part of a three-man embassy to intercede with the pope on behalf of Florence. While he was gone, Corso Donati returned to Florence, and the Blacks took command of the city. Dante, in absentia, was condemned to death by fire in March 1302 if he should return. Thus began the period of his exile, which lasted until his death in 1321. He would never again set foot in his native Florence.

Dante lived an itinerant life, dependent upon the charity of various friends and patrons. As his ancestor Cacciaguida will tell him in *Paradise*, the third part of the *Commedia*, "You'll leave behind you everything you love / most dearly:…You shall prove / How someone else's bread can taste of salt, / and how it is a hard and bitter walk, /

climbing and coming down another's stairs."[21] Cacciaguida is foretelling an exile that, based on the date of the journey recounted in the poem, has not yet occurred.

Dante's wife and children remained in Florence, at least until his sons also were exiled and condemned to death by beheading if they returned. Dante traveled alone to Bologna, Padua, and possibly even Paris. He spent the years 1312 to 1319 in Verona under the patronage of Cangrande della Scala, before settling in Ravenna. His wife appears to have joined him in Ravenna. So, too, in 1320 did his daughter, Antonia, who took the name of Beatrice when she entered a convent there.

Initially, Dante collaborated with the other banished White Guelfs hoping to return to Florence. But he ultimately disassociated himself from both factions (White and Black) and became, in the words he gave Cacciaguida, "a party of one."[22] He intensified his study of philosophy and theology during his wanderings and wrote the unfinished but still quite massive *Convivio* (1304–1307), which he envisioned as a poetic and prose compendium of contemporary knowledge and thought. He wrote a treatise, *De Monarchia* (1312–13), explaining why having a single emperor rule over a unified western Europe was critical to the peace and stability necessary for human life, enterprise, and creativity to flourish. And, most interesting, he wrote *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (1303–1304), which praised the written use of the Italian vernacular but was itself written, without apparent irony, in Latin, as all learned works were in that time. He did switch to the vernacular, however, when he began writing the *Commedia* in 1307 or 1308, finishing it shortly before his death. Dante died in Ravenna on September 14, 1321, probably of malaria contracted while he was traveling back from a successful diplomatic mission to Venice.

The Italian prose writer Giovanni Boccaccio, the subject of our next chapter, wrote a fascinating if somewhat fanciful biography of Dante, in which he described him as follows:

> Our poet…was of medium height, and after he came to maturity he bent somewhat as he walked, and his gait was grave and gentle. He was always dressed in good clothes of a fashion appropriate to his years. He face was long, his nose aquiline, his eyes rather big, his jaw large, and his lower lip protruded beyond the upper. His complexion was dark, his hair and beard thick, black, and curly, and his expression was melancholy and thoughtful.[23]

Boccaccio further writes that "in all things [Dante] was more courteous and civil than others."[24] He also notes, however, that Dante

could be lofty and disdainful. Indeed, Dante spurned an offer to return to Florence—an offer made as he became increasingly famous—because he found the conditions imposed upon him unworthy of his dignity. Boccaccio also explains that Dante was lustful both in youth and as a mature man, excusing the sleight by noting, “If I am silent about anything that was not praiseworthy in him, I shall destroy the faith of the reader in the praiseworthy virtues which I have already pointed out.”[25] It is just that honest mixture of the praiseworthy and the not-so-praiseworthy that characterizes Dante's own portraits in the *Commedia*.

## THE *COMMEDIA*

Why did Dante call his great work a comedy? There is very little humor in eternal damnation (the occasional *New Yorker* cartoon notwithstanding); nor in the struggles of the penitents in purgatory; nor even in the eternal bliss of those who reach the empyrean. As Mark Twain famously remarked, “There is no humor in heaven.”[26]

Dante explained his choice of title in a letter to his patron Cangrande. He gave two reasons, each dependent on the fact that, in the classical tradition, comedy and tragedy were considered mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories. First, tragedy progresses from a noble and quiet beginning to a terrible conclusion, whereas comedy progresses from a bitter or chaotic beginning to a happy conclusion. The *Commedia* begins in darkness and confusion and ends in paradise. Second, the mode of speech in tragedy is “exalted and sublime,” whereas that in comedy is “lax and humble.”[27] Dante's characters use everyday speech, though, as he notes Horace allowed in his treatise on poetry,[28] Dante mixes that with “other kinds of poetic narration.”[29] Most important, Dante writes in his native Tuscan, a living language, rather than in self-consciously literary Latin, which had not been a spoken language, except within the artificial confines of universities, for hundreds of years. The overall effect, even in the highest strains of *Paradise*, is a poetry of great simplicity, directness, and accessibility, as well as surpassing beauty.

Dante's work was later rechristened the *Divine Comedy* by Boccaccio as a mark not just of its subject matter but also of its exalted literary status. Boccaccio's *Decameron* was in turn dubbed by Renaissance scholars as the *Commedia Umana* (the “Human Comedy”).[30] But, if those scholars wished to draw a contrast with

Dante, they were mistaken. For Dante, too, displays the full scope of human life, in all its concrete reality, within the structure of the afterworld.[31]

Dante freely intermixes pagan and Christian elements in his afterworld. He includes mythical creatures and legendary figures along with historical and contemporary ones. They all find a place in Dante's afterlife because they are all part of our collective cultural experience, and Dante wants to order and to understand that experience. He wants to know where everything fits in the divine scheme. For Dante, it is not just an article of faith that there is such a scheme. He simply cannot envision the alternative, in which everything is driven by meaningless chance. Just as he thought an emperor was needed to establish peace for art and letters to thrive, so he thought a divine order was needed to give purpose and meaning to human life.

We of course suspend our disbelief as we travel with Dante through the afterworld, just as we do in the plays of Shakespeare and the novels of Balzac. This is unproblematic for any modern reader, although some of Dante's contemporaries apparently took his journey as fact. But Dante's explicit overlay of philosophical and theological doctrine and his heavy use of allegory makes our entry into his world seem more forbidding. The doctrines and allegories may be critical to a complete understanding of the poem, but, as T. S. Eliot and others have stressed, we do not have to believe the doctrines or trace all the allegories to appreciate Dante's achievement.[32] For that, only a sensitive and sympathetic reading is required. On a first and even a second reading, the reader should largely ignore the many editorial footnotes and endnotes explaining doctrinal points and tracing allegories. The one exception are the notes giving the backgrounds and histories of specific individuals Dante encounters in the afterworld, since Dante often assumes a level of personal and literary knowledge in his readers that would be unrealistic today.

Also of secondary importance is the elaborate structure and numerology of the work itself. Dante believed that the universe was ordered mathematically, and he aspires to a comparable symmetry in his poem. The sacred number 3 (of the Trinity), the perfect unit 10, and their squares are of particular importance to Dante. There are three canticles (*Inferno*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*), each of which contains thirty-three cantos. With an introductory canto, that makes one hundred in all, the square of ten. The basic unit in each canto is a tercet (three lines of verse), and Dante employs a *terza rima* scheme, in which the first and third line of each tercet rhyme and the second line rhymes with the first and third lines of the following tercet (ABA,

BCB, CDC, etc.). Thus, each tercet is linked to the one before and the one after in an interlocking series. There are nine circles in his vision of hell, divided into three categories: incontinence, violence, and fraud. So, too, there are nine levels in purgatory (including Ante-Purgatory, seven terraces corresponding to the seven deadly sins, and the Earthly Paradise) and among the planets and stars of paradise. There is considerable aesthetic pleasure to be found in watching Dante work creatively within these many numeric constraints, just as there is with a Bach fugue. But one does not have to be trained in counterpoint to enjoy a Bach fugue, and the modern reader of Dante need not understand the numerology, the cosmology, or even the niceties of theology to find pleasure and profit in the *Commedia*. What the reader has to understand and to care about is human character and the complex, often ambiguous circumstances we face and the sometimes-disastrous choices we all make. Dante never sacrifices the richness and complexity of his human portraits in order to make a doctrinal or allegorical point.

## THE DARK WOOD

> *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*
> *mi ritrovai per una selva oscura,*
> *che la diritta via era smarrita.*

These are the opening lines of the *Commedia*. Translated literally, they read:

> In the middle of the journey of our life
> I found myself in a dark wood,
> where the straight way was lost.[33]

Several things about this passage, even aside from its haunting beauty, are worth noting.[34] First, life is treated as a journey, a continuous process of movement and change from birth to death. Second, it is “our life” that is in question, not just the narrator's. Dante is going to address an issue of significance to all men and women. Yet he will approach it, as he must, as a journey of personal discovery. The “I” refers to Dante the pilgrim, the central character in the *Commedia*. Dante is midway in the journey through life. Given the

biblical lifespan of seventy years,[35] he is therefore thirty-five, and the year is 1300 (two years before his exile). Despite this exact correspondence, Dante the pilgrim is not to be equated with the author, any more than we could blindly equate Boethius the prisoner with Boethius the author of the *Consolation of Philosophy*.

On a literal level, Dante is lost in a dark wood, frightened and alone. On an emotional, moral, and spiritual level, he is depressed, confused, and anxious. He does not even recall how he slipped into this state: "I was so full of sleep just at that point / when I first left the way of truth behind."[36] He had fallen into a personal crisis "so bitter, death is hardly more."[37] Yet he immediately reassures the reader that he survived this crisis and found his path forward, and that he is writing this book "to reveal the good that came to me."[38] The *Commedia*, in the tradition of Augustine's *Confessions* and Boethius's *Consolation*, will tell the story of how one man overcame the dark night of his soul and found renewed meaning in his life. We as readers are told that we will benefit vicariously from following Dante on that journey.

The parallels with the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a book of great importance to Dante during his exile, are particularly deliberate. So, too, are the differences. Dante the pilgrim, like Boethius the prisoner, is in despair at the beginning of the book. But Boethius's despair was caused by external misfortune. He had been exiled and thrown into prison under sentence of death. Dante's despair is self-imposed, and he is very careful to date his journey before his exile and sentence of death. These circumstances are *not* the source of his existential crisis. Dante himself has strayed from the true path, and he does not know where to turn. Or, rather, he cannot summon the will to do so. He sees ahead of him a hill on which "that wandering light of Heaven," the sun, shines to lead men aright.[39] But he cannot reach it. When he tries, his way is blocked first by a leopard, then by a lion, and finally by a she-wolf.

The allegorical significance of these three beasts—traditionally representing lust, pride, and avarice—is important, but secondary to the feelings of terror and paralysis they inspire in Dante. He simply cannot advance. He sees the way from the dark wood to the hill lighted by the sun but cannot reach it directly. Dante vividly conveys these feelings, while at the same time unfolding the moral sources of the pilgrim's despair. The love that gave Dante his *vita nuova* has been perverted and misdirected toward earthly things: sex, power, and money. His habits and character have so hardened that he no longer knows how to recapture the pure love that once governed his soul and was the source of his bliss.

His journey is allegorical, but his transformation is real. And for

much of that journey (through hell and purgatory) he is guided by the Roman poet Virgil. Dante, like Boethius, will draw upon the classical tradition. But Dante will rely on a fellow poet, not on philosophy alone. Whereas the figure of Philosophy in the *Consolation* was simply a talking allegory, Virgil is a fully rounded and developed character in the *Commedia*. We understand his allegorical significance as an embodiment of human art and wisdom, but Dante responds to him as a human being and as his most important teacher.

> Honor and light of every poet, may
> my long study avail me, and the love
> that made me search the volume of your work.
> You are my teacher, my authority;
> you alone are the one from whom I took
> the style whose loveliness has honored me.[40]

The fact that Dante chooses a poet rather than a philosopher as his guide is both natural and important. There are plenty of references to philosophy in the *Commedia*, and Dante draws heavily upon Aristotle and others. But only a poet can—as Virgil did and Dante will do—combine poetry with philosophy, theology, history, cosmology, politics, and mythology in a transformative account of life's journey. Like Boethius's prisoner, Dante will journey from darkness into the light of truth. Yet he will do so not through the exploration of philosophical abstractions. Dante will present instead a richly developed, concrete poetic vision that unites everything he has learned about human life and the universe we inhabit.

Virgil sent his own character, Aeneas, into the underworld to seek guidance and to learn what he had to do to fulfill his destiny. Virgil now appears to Dante in his darkest hour to tell him of the journey through the underworld Dante too must undertake in order to escape the savage place in which he finds himself. It is Good Friday, at the time of Christ's crucifixion. Virgil offers to guide him as far on the journey as is possible for a pagan who has not experienced Christ's salvation. Dante is understandably fearful and unsure that the hard road Virgil proposes is not worse than his current paralysis. But Dante is reassured and able to gather his courage when Virgil explains that Beatrice herself implored him to come to Dante's aid and that Dante will soon be reunited with her. “He set on,” explains Dante, “and I held my pace behind.”[41]

## THE GATES OF HELL

Nine lines are inscribed over the archways of the gates of hell:

> I AM THE WAY INTO THE CITY OF WOE,
> I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL PAIN,
> I AM THE WAY TO GO AMONG THE LOST.
> JUSTICE CAUSED MY HIGH ARCHITECT TO MOVE:
> DIVINE OMNIPOTENCE CREATED ME,
> THE HIGHEST WISDOM, AND THE PRIMAL LOVE.
> BEFORE ME THERE WERE NO CREATED THINGS
> BUT THOSE THAT LAST FOREVER—AS DO I.
> ABANDON ALL HOPE YOU WHO ENTER HERE.[42]

The first five lines are unproblematic from an interpretive point of view. This is hell, after all. It is a city of woe where the damned suffer eternal pain. Divine justice and divine omnipotence ensure that its inhabitants are being properly punished for the sins they committed in life.

But the assertion in the sixth line that primal love drove the creation of hell is a harder concept to accept, though one that is critical to what follows. What Dante is suggesting is that God, in his love, gave men and women intellect and free will. As a result, each of us can make our own choices in life. But, as we make those choices, our characters harden, and change becomes more difficult. We move gradually and almost imperceptibly away from what is best in ourselves until we have completely lost our higher aspirations. In hell, further change is impossible. We are what we have chosen, and our condition of estrangement from God's love has become fixed and immutable. That is the punishment. Since God's love, as well as his justice, created hell, the eternal pains suffered there will be a reflection not of tortures imposed, but of the ways in which the souls there have voluntarily estranged themselves from God. As Eliot puts it, "Hell is not a place but a *state*."[43] The "punishments," if we can even call them that, are self-inflicted; the primal love that is part of our natural birthright and drives our every interaction has become perverted and a source of suffering rather than joy.

The last line over the gates of hell is also worth noting: "*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*" ("Abandon all hope you who enter here."). That line is taken directly from the Roman comic playwright Plautus. In his *Two Sisters Named Bacchis*, the tutor Lydus warns his young charge (in vain, of course) to avoid the two courtesans of the title. He calls the door to their house "a door to hell" and states that "no one comes this way unless he has abandoned all hope who enters

here."[44] Dante's borrowing from comedy is both apt and a subtle warning to the reader not to take too literally what is to come and to recognize that hell, too, will have its comic moments.

## THE FIRST CIRCLE

The scene that first greets Dante is phantasmagoric, full of twisted, flailing shades and strange tongues wailing and echoing through the dark. "I had not thought death had unmade so many," Dante tells us.[45] He encounters swarms of naked, miserable souls stung into constant motion by wasps and flies, blood dripping down their faces and mingling with their tears. These are the uncommitted, those who never took a stand in life for good or for ill. They include the angels who neither supported God nor joined Satan's rebellion, as well as Pope Celestine V—the predecessor of Dante's nemesis, Boniface VIII—who made *il gran rifiuto* ("the great denial") by giving up the papacy in disgust and returning to his isolated hermitage rather than staying to reform the church. All evil is love perverted and misdirected. But these souls had such a deficiency of love that they embraced neither good nor evil. Heaven will not have them, but hell, too, shuns the uncommitted, "lest they bring glory to the wicked there."[46] Mercy and justice alike hold them in contempt.[47] Dante, a man of passionate commitment, driven from his home by partisan strife, denies the uncommitted a home even in hell. They remain forever in the anteroom, goaded into movement as they never were in life.

The other souls, those of the recently dead, crowd the riverbank eager for Charon, the mythological boatman of the dead, to ferry them across the river Acheron into hell proper. Dante is puzzled by their eagerness, but it is explained by the same primal love that created hell. The condemned chose their fate; they were driven on by their own desire. Yet now, as they see the eternal consequences of their choices, they blame everyone except themselves, casting their curses at God, their parents, the human race, and their own birth, even as they push forward to board the ferry that offers no return.

Hell proper is an abyss. Nine concentric circles descend into ever darker depths of woe. Dante arrives first in Limbo, where the virtuous pagans are condemned to an eternity apart from God. While technically in the first circle of hell, the virtuous pagans are subject to none of the self-imposed torments of the sinners Dante will visit in the lower circles. Indeed, the setting is very much like the Elysian Fields of Greek mythology, a fresh, green meadow where people with looks

of great authority and gentle voices converse softly together. These pagan men and women led blameless, even exemplary, lives but they never knew Christ because they lived before he brought salvation. They are thereby excluded from God's grace. Virgil is one of their number, and he explains that their only suffering is this: "*che sanza speme vivemo in disio*" ("that without hope we live in desire").[48] They long for a fulfillment they can never experience and never really even understand. Dante will be haunted by these words and by this awkward bit of Christian doctrine throughout his journey.

From a high space, open and filled with light, Dante sees Old Testament patriarchs and heroes of ancient Greece and Rome. When he raises his eyes a little higher, he sees "the master of all those who know," sitting amidst a group of philosophers, all of them looking up to him and showing him honor.[49] The "master of all those who know" is Aristotle, who elsewhere is referred to simply as "the Philosopher." Even Socrates and Plato pay him homage.

A more personal encounter occurs when the four great poets—Homer, Horace, Ovid, and Lucan—approach and welcome Virgil back as the fifth of their number. Dante says that they included him as well, making him a sixth. This is quite a claim, for Dante at that time was still fairly obscure. The *Inferno* would make him famous throughout Italy and beyond and ensure that he was indeed numbered among the greatest of all poets. But it is a remarkable boast in context, and Dante the pilgrim will atone for his pride in purgatory. Yet the journey itself is his justification: it explains how Dante was inspired to write the *Commedia*, and the account itself makes good the boast.[50] Dante's congress with the great poets of antiquity, as well as the great philosophers and saints, and the remarkable men and women he meets along the way, all contribute to his poetic development. We will discuss here some of the most important of those encounters.

## PAOLO AND FRANCESCA

Dante descends to the first of the four circles of incontinence: lust, gluttony, avarice (along with the related sin of prodigality), and wrath. Saint Thomas, channeling Aristotle, has provided the taxonomy of sin for Dante's *Inferno*. Sinners are placed according to the gravity of their deeds and the corruption of their wills. Both become worse as Dante descends. One would expect, then, to find those placed right after the virtuous pagans, in the circle of lust, to be the most sympathetic. What one does not expect is just how powerfully that

sympathy is invoked in Dante's encounter with Francesca da Rimini.

Dante provides very little detail about Francesca, assuming that his readers will know the background of the still-recent scandal. Francesca was given in marriage by her family, as a sort of peace offering, to Giovanni Malatesta of Rimini, a crippled warrior lord. She had an affair with her husband's brother, Paolo. Giovanni surprised them in bed together and killed them both on the spot.

The lustful are caught in a whirlwind, driven and buffeted by love like starlings in a storm, never resting and never ceasing to mingle their moans and cries with the sounds of the tempest. Among their number, of course, are Helen of Troy, Dido, Cleopatra, Tristan, and, more surprising, Achilles, undone by his love for Patroclus. But Dante especially notes "two shades who fly as one / and seem so lightly carried on the wind."[51] With Virgil's approval and encouragement, Dante implores the two in sympathetic words to come and speak with them. Responding to that sympathy, the two spirits immediately veer toward Dante and his guide, and without further encouragement Francesca begins to address them.

Her speech, the most famous in the *Inferno* (or, if second, then only to that of Ulysses in canto 26), is well calculated to invoke Dante's pity. She begins by flattering Dante for his courage and courtesy in traveling to the underworld to visit them, for she simply assumes, with charming self-absorption, that that is the entire purpose of his journey. If God were our friend, she tells Dante (as if only some minor misunderstanding on God's part prevented that friendship), they would pray for him. She then delivers a sort of canzone that would be thoroughly at home in the *Vita Nuova*. Indeed, the first line of her canzone echoes the first line of the poem in chapter 20 of the *Vita Nuova*,[52] which in turn pays homage to Dante's predecessor Guido Guinizelli and his poem *Al cor gentil*.

> Love that flames soonest in the gentle heart
> seized him for that sweet body which was snatched
> from me—and how it happened hurts me still.
> Love, which allows no loved one not to love,
> seized me with such a strong delight in him
> that, as you see, it will not leave me yet.
> Love led us to one death.[53]

Francesca both flatters Dante through quotation and invokes the poetic tradition of courtly love, which treats love as the most important thing in life, an overwhelming force that sweeps aside all merely conventional attachments, such as marriage.

Dante, now thoroughly seduced, begs Francesca to tell him how

love revealed itself to her. She purports to hesitate. She notes, paraphrasing Boethius, that "there is no greater grief / than to recall a time of happiness / while plunged in misery."[54] Yet it is clear enough that Francesca feels compelled to tell her story, to justify her actions, and to lament her fate.

> One day we two were reading for delight
> about how love had mastered Lancelot;
> we were alone and innocent and felt
> No cause to fear. And as we read, at times
> we went pale, as we caught each other's glance,
> but we were conquered by one point alone.
> For when we read that the much-longed-for smile
> accepted such a gentle lover's kiss,
> this man, whom nothing will divide from me,
> Trembled to place his lips upon my mouth.
> A pander was that author, and his book![55]

"*Quel giorno più non vi leggemmo avante*" ("That day, we read no more"), Francesca concludes.

At the close of her speech, Dante falls insensible. He is overwhelmed with pity. But he is also overwhelmed by guilt. Francesca is a powerfully sympathetic figure, a romantic heroine forced into marriage with a brutal, crippled husband. She deserved the love she found with Paolo, and she recounts with great beauty and tenderness the trembling movement that brought them together. She did not deserve the violent death that followed. We, as readers, feel that strongly.

Yet there are also warning signs in Dante's text. There is a reason Francesca is in the circle of the lustful, and it has to do with the perversion of her will rather than of her love. She takes no responsibility for her actions and assigns none to Paolo. Love "seized" and "conquered" them, she says. The book was a "pander." In her account, neither she nor Paolo incurs guilt for something that simply happened to them rather than for something chosen by them. Yet there clearly was a choice here. Francesca delights in the tradition of courtly love. She reads herself and Paolo into the story of Guinevere and Lancelot. She wants to live in a world in which love knows no bounds and acknowledges no constraints. She keeps no critical distance from the poems and stories that enthrall her.[56] And Dante, as an author of such poems, shares in her guilt. Love is indeed a powerful force—it is, as noted over the gates of hell, the source of evil as well as good—and must therefore be controlled by intellect and will. Francesca's placement in the second circle of hell is an indictment of

Dante's own *dolce stil nuovo* and a warning to us as readers. Intellect and a disciplined will are needed along with a gentle heart.

## FARINATA AND CAVALCANTI

Dante follows Virgil down through the first five circles and across the river Styx to the city of Dis (Satan), but they are refused passage by the fallen angels who guard the entryway to inner hell. It takes an angel sent from heaven to clear their way. They enter the sixth circle, where heretics are baked in open tombs, tombs that will be sealed for eternity once the day of judgment comes.

Yet there is moral ambiguity and admiration even here. As Dante and Virgil pass through the section reserved for the followers of Epicurus, who taught that the soul dies with the body, Farinata degli Uberti rears up from his tomb, visible from the waist up, to address them. He has heard them speaking with a Tuscan accent and hails them as fellow countrymen. He is erect and proud, “as if he held all Hell in scorn.”[57]

Farinata was a Ghibelline leader, who twice defeated the Guelfs in combat. The second time, after the Battle of Montaperti, many of the Ghibelline families and their allies from Sienna wanted to raze Florence to the ground. Farinata alone stood out firmly against them, and they abandoned the plan. A few years later, the resurgent Guelfs drove the Ghibellines from Florence for a final time. Farinata and his family were forced into exile, and all their possessions were seized.

Having believed only in the temporal world, Farinata in hell is still obsessed with the political infighting of Florence. He demands to know Dante's family and responds somewhat smugly to Dante's Guelf origins, noting that he, Farinata, had twice scattered them. And twice they returned, responds Dante, rising to the bait, “an art which yours, it seems, have not well learned.”[58]

Before Farinata can reply, another head appears over the end of the same tomb. It is Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti, the father of Dante's friend and fellow poet Guido. Cavalcanti is a Guelf, yet he had married his son Guido to Farinata's daughter in a vain bid for peace. Just as Farinata is obsessed with Florentine politics even in the underworld, Cavalcanti is obsessed with the fate of his son. He looks searchingly at Dante and Virgil, expecting Guido to be with them. “If through this dungeon of the blind / you go by means of genius at its height, / where is my son?” Cavalcanti asks. “Why is he not with

you?"[59] Guido, after all, once was more famous than Dante.

Dante's answer is not a model of tact. He notes that he is being led through hell at the request of one who perhaps Guido "held in scorn." The "one" is Beatrice, for love of whom Dante is making this journey. Recall that Guido wrote only of the bitterness and pain of love, not of its ennobling and purifying power. Dante is in effect saying that Guido has fallen short as a complete poet.

But Cavalcanti hears the answer differently. He focuses on Dante's use of the past tense—"he held"—and fears that Guido is dead: "Has the sweet sunlight ceased to strike his eyes?"[60] When Dante hesitates in response, Cavalcanti sinks back into his tomb. If his beloved Guido is dead, Cavalcanti has no more interest in the world.

Farinata then proceeds as if the interruption had not even occurred and was of no concern to him. Stung by Dante's reference to the Ghibelline defeat, Farinata prophesizes Dante's own exile from Florence and complains that the Guelfs are pitiless in their resentment against the Ghibellines. He admits that he shared in the bloody slaughter of the Guelfs at Montaperti but insists that, "when each man agreed to wipe away / Florence from off the earth, I was alone, / her sole defender in the sight of all."[61]

Dante then begs Farinata to explain to him how he can see the future when neither he nor Cavalcanti knows the present. It is part of their punishment, as Farinata illustrates. They recall the past and can dimly perceive the future, but the present—which was their entire focus on Earth and remains their focus in hell—is blank to them. Dante, remorseful at his earlier hesitation, urges Farinata to reassure Cavalcanti that his son is still alive. But Farinata does not respond. Cavalcanti's concerns are not his own.

Dante clearly admires both men. Despite their partisan rivalry, Dante calls Farinata *magnanimo* (great-souled). Cavalcanti, with his *cor gentil*, his eager concern for his son, and his love of the "sweet sunlight," is highly sympathetic. Their personalities and preoccupations are completely different, and their speeches reflect their natures. But their sin is the same. They do not see their lives within any greater context. They have shut themselves off from God and have acknowledged only a temporal existence. As a result, their temporal concerns, distilled here to their essence, have become a tomb from which they cannot escape. Farinata, in his Ghibelline passion, and Cavalcanti, in his love for his son, are both searching for a false form of immortality.[62] They cling desperately to the world but in vain. Erich Auerbach, in his field-shaping work, *Mimesis*, which traces the changing ways in which art imitates reality, cites the Farinata/Cavalcanti canto as a type of realism never before attempted and "an almost painfully immediate impression of the earthly reality of human

beings."[63] The same could be said of Francesca and, as we will see, of Ulysses and Ugolino and of so many other men and women fixed and immutable in Dante's hell.

## ULYSSES

There are three circles in lower hell: violence (7), fraud (8), and treachery (9), and each circle is subdivided in a Thomistic typology of specific wrongs. Dante passes murderers immersed in a river of boiling blood. "*Oh cieca cupidigia e ira folle*," he laments, "*che sì ci sproni ne la vita corta*": "O foolish wrath and blind cupidity, / that dig their spurs in us through our short lives."[64] He meets with suicides (violence against self) imprisoned in thorn trees and blasphemers, whose only torture is their own mad rage.[65] Corrupt popes, who sold their divine office for money, are buried upside down with only their legs showing, and Dante makes clear that Boniface VIII will soon join them.

Even in lower hell, however, there are men to be admired and pitied. The encounter with his old teacher, Brunetto Latini, has already been mentioned. Ser Brunetto runs with the sodomites (violence against nature) through a rain of fire. His company includes scholars, great men of letters, and clerks of wide renown.[66] But he slows to greet his former pupil. Dante walks for a time by his side, calls him "father, gentle and beloved," declares his gratitude, and promises to preserve his reputation.[67] He ends with a remarkable simile as Brunetto rushes to rejoin his fellows:

> Then he turned round, and seemed like those who strip
> to race for the green banner through the fields
> about Verona; and of those he seemed
> The one who wins, and not the one who loses.[68]

Brunetto is in hell, but Dante considers him a winner, not a loser. Not even in the Francesca passages is the moral ambiguity of divine justice more evident. Dante acknowledges the church's judgment on sodomy, but he does not accept it. He embraces the man—his beloved teacher Ser Brunetto—and leaves the judgment to God.

The encounter with Ulysses is equally ambiguous. Ulysses is encased in a double tongue of flame with his fellow Greek hero Diomedes. In a pastoral image out of keeping with lower hell, Dante compares the flames of the evil counselors in the eighth circle to

“crowds of fireflies in the twilight dell” of a peaceful summer evening.[69] Ulysses, of course, conceived the wooden horse that led to the fall of Troy. In the *Odyssey*, Homer called him ἄνδρα πολύτροπον, a man of twists and turns, a man skilled in all ways of contending.

Dante never read Homer, even in translation, though he was undoubtedly familiar with the story of Homer's hero. Dante's Ulysses is a unique and wonderful creation with a very different fate. After his long journey back from Troy, Dante's Ulysses explains, neither affection for his son, nor reverence for his father, nor love for his long-suffering wife, Penelope, could keep him at home. He burned “to go forth / to gain experience of the world, and learn / of every human vice, and human worth.”[70] In other words, he longed to do just what Dante is doing. He took a journey exactly like Dante's to push beyond the outer bounds of human knowledge.

With a small group of his most loyal comrades, Ulysses sets sail in a single boat over the Mediterranean Sea, touching on both continents, to the Gates of Hercules (i.e., the Straits of Gibraltar), the limit of the known world. There he urges on his fellows to ignore the danger and embrace the quest:

> O comrades who have won,
> through countless perils to the setting sun,
> to the few years that may before us lie
> let not your hearts’ experience deny
> of lands beyond as yet by none surveyed.
> Men are you and reflect that men are made
> to follow valor's lure and wisdom's quest
> and not like beasts content in ease to rest.[71]

They sail on together into the unknown Southern Hemisphere until they come within sight of the mountain of purgatory, where Dante himself soon will go. But “*de la nova terra un turbo nacque*” (“from the new land a whirlwind was born”), and the little vessel is turned three times around before going down prow first until the ocean closes over them.[72]

Ulysses fails in his quest for virtue and wisdom. It is a failure recited in the high style of ancient tragedy. Dante will succeed in his own journey, his *Commedia*, but only with the help first of Virgil, then of Beatrice, and ultimately of God. Dante, in his humility, remains within the medieval framework even as he seeks wisdom both human and divine. Ulysses is guilty of hubris in trying to go beyond the bounds of human knowledge and constraint. As Italian humanist and Yale professor Giuseppe Mazzotta explains, Ulysses is properly among

the evil counselors in setting forth on the unknown sea: “He has led his men to nothing after having promised them everything.”[73] Yet, as we shall see, the noble and inspiring figure of Ulysses will continue to trouble Dante throughout his journey.

## UGOLINO

The ninth, and last, circle of hell holds traitors frozen in ice, some with only their heads exposed, others completely encased. Among the former is Ganelon, who betrayed Roland to the Saracens. But Dante's attention is riveted by a pair of men frozen into a single hole. The one behind rips with his teeth the back of the other's head, where the neck meets the brain, gnawing as at a hunk of bread.

The man behind is Count Ugolino, a Guelf who betrayed his party to the Ghibellines and was betrayed in turn by the man in front, Archbishop Ruggieri of Pisa. When Dante asks the cause of such hatred, Ugolino wipes his mouth on Ruggieri's hair and leans his own head back to answer. Ugolino (echoing Francesca) says that it will break his heart anew to recount the events but that he will do so in order to make known the infamy of Ruggieri, who shut Ugolino in a remote tower with his four small sons.[74] For a time they were given food each day. But one day, when the appointed hour drew near,

> I could hear them nailing up the door
> of the horrible tower, and gazed upon
> the faces of my sons, and spoke no more.
> I did not weep, I had so turned to stone.[75]

Ugolino gnawed his own hands in grief, and his sons, thinking him hungry, offered their bodies to be eaten. In silent despair they waited. After a few days, the youngest died, his final words echoing those of Christ: “Papa, why don't you help me?”[76] The other three died in succession, and Ugolino, now blind, caressed them and called each by name. “Then hunger did what sorrow could not do,” he concludes,[77] digging his teeth with renewed fury into Ruggieri's skull.

The great Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges sees ambiguity in the last line and suggests that Ugolino resorted to cannibalism in life as he did in death. The more natural reading is that hunger finally released Ugolino from life but not from hatred. Ugolino could have given words of loving comfort to his sons in their final hours and turned their thoughts, and his own, toward God. But he knew only hate. In

the lowest circle of hell, we find the counterpoint to the story of Paolo and Francesca.[78] Ugolino and Ruggieri are joined forever in hate, just as Paolo and Francesca are joined forever in love. And yet, can one really begrudge Ugolino his hate, any more than Francesca her love?

Words fail Dante in the final circle of hell. The tongue that calls "mama" and "papa," he explains, cannot begin to describe the horrors there.[79] Language also will fail him before the splendors of heaven. For language was created by man and falters before both the subhuman and the divine. Even weeping is impossible in the lowest, frozen depths of hell, where teardrops form an icy dam that fills the sockets of the eyes and backs up into the skull.

Dante and Virgil make their way down to where Satan himself, cast out from heaven, is stuck fast in the ice, silent and immobile except for the slow, rhythmic beating of his vast wings. They climb down his body until they reach the center of the Earth, then reverse their orientation and begin to climb upward on a new path toward the world of light. They started their journey on Good Friday. It was before dawn on Easter morning when, reenacting the resurrection of Christ after three days among the dead, they "came out to see, once more, the stars."[80] Hope replaces despair. Death gives way to a new life.

## TO BEATRICE AND BEYOND

Many readers find their interest waning in purgatory and disappearing altogether in paradise. In *Inferno*, the fixed perversion of the will makes the characters there distinct and memorable. In *Purgatory*, that perversion gives way to an active striving after the good, which is at times more edifying than entertaining. The souls in purgatory repented of their sins in life and have avoided hell. But, before they can enter paradise, they must still correct their errant dispositions by following Aristotle's advice to straighten a bent stick by bending it in the opposite direction. Thus, the proud humble themselves by bearing great rocks that press them to the ground; the slothful are in constant, rushing motion; and the gluttonous fast amidst the delightful smells of rich food.

Dante and the other pilgrims in purgatory seek to renew their souls, to wash them clean of worldly taint. Although the penance for each of the seven deadly sins is uniform, the faults are individual and reflective of character and circumstance, just as in hell. Thus, at least some of those portrayed still stand out in high relief. But eternal bliss

is an even more difficult subject for poetry than is striving for the good. As T. S. Eliot explains, “We have (whether we know it or not) a prejudice against beatitude as material for poetry.”[81] In *Paradise*, individual characteristics all but fade from view in favor of philosophical, theological, prophetic, and mystical musings. Paradise can, at times, seem a slog.

Yet there are many wonderful moments in both canticles. We will focus here on one passage from each that are related to one another in ways both subtle and profound. In the first passage, Virgil has led Dante through hell and up the mountain of purgatory until they reach the earthly paradise from which Adam and Eve were cast out. At this point, his guidance falters. “You have reached a part / where I discern no further on my own,” he tells Dante.

> I've led you here by strength of mind, and art;
> take your own pleasure for your leader now.
> …
> No longer wait for what I do or say.
> Your judgment now is free and whole and true;
>
> to fail to follow its will would be to stray.
> Lord of yourself I crown and miter you.[82]

Virgil has done all that human art and wisdom can accomplish. Dante has been given another *vita nuova*. His “judgment now is free and whole and true.” He can find his own way through all the realms of man, both as poet and as pilgrim. He has mastered the classical tradition.

But the classical tradition falters before the mysteries of faith. Any guidance to the realm of eternal bliss must still come from another, and that other is Beatrice, who appears to Dante in a flaming red dress like the one in which he first saw her. Dante trembles and feels the great might of love stir within him. He turns to Virgil, with a quote from the *Aeneid* on his lips, but Virgil is gone, and not even the prospect of earthly paradise and the reunion with Beatrice can check Dante's tears.

The remarkable thing is that Beatrice responds to his tears not as the abstract embodiment of divine love but as a woman. “Dante,” she calls to him—the only time his name is used in the entire poem. She reproaches him for his tears and bids him to recollect that it was she who sent Virgil to guide him there. Instead of lamenting the loss of Virgil, he should be rejoicing in his reunion with her. She also chides him for his infidelity after her death, for failing to transition his love from her flesh, crumbling into dust, to her immortal beauty.[83] He had

fallen so low that only a journey of his own through the portals of the dead could recall him to himself, and only her tears and her entreaties accomplished that end. Stung by guilt, Dante makes a final confession that, when he could no longer gaze upon her face, he gave himself to false pleasures, "which promise all and never follow through."[84] He then is plunged into the river Lethe, where he drinks the waters, forgets his prior sins, and is troubled no more.

> From its most holy waters I returned
> as remade as a new young plant appears
> renewed in every newly springing frond,
> Pure, and in trim for mounting to the stars.[85]

Dante the pilgrim may no longer be troubled, but the same cannot be said for the reader. Why must Dante forget his prior trespasses? Is not that forgetfulness a form of betrayal of himself and his past, a form of willful blindness? The urgency of those questions is accentuated in the second passage, in canto 27 of *Paradise*, which concerns Dante's continued identification with Ulysses.

Dante has already alluded to Ulysses twice in *Purgatory*. In the opening lines, he writes, "My little ship of ingenuity / now hoists her sails to speed through better waters, / leaving behind so pitiless a sea."[86] Dante's boat, unlike that of Ulysses, escapes the hazardous seas and finds the safe waters of purgatory. Dante has trimmed his sails for a divinely sanctioned journey within the horizons set by his faith. Ulysses neither sought sanction nor acknowledged limits in his quest for knowledge and wisdom. He launched himself on the open seas of humanism, which offer no place of intellectual peace and moral repose. Those open seas, like the false pleasure of the flesh, "promise all and never follow through."[87]

Later, in canto 19 of *Purgatory*, a siren comes to Dante in a dream and specifically mentions the power of her song over Ulysses. She claims that Dante, too, needs nothing beyond her song "so fully do I please!"[88] And Dante admits that he could hardly have turned his mind from her, so entranced was he. Beatrice appears in his dream and urges Virgil to dispel this false image, which he does by ripping aside her gown and exposing her paunch and the putrefying stench of death. This dream anticipates the encounter with Beatrice in canto 30 and her just reproaches. But it also shows the power of Dante's own attachment to the poetry and beauty of worldly things and how closely he identifies himself with Ulysses.

Finally, in canto 27 of *Paradise*, when Dante has reached the Primum Mobile, the highest sphere of heaven where the First Mover is

to be found, Beatrice bids him look down and trace the path of his journey. Dante does so and immediately sees where *il varco folle*, "the mad rush," of Ulysses occurred.[89] Dante succeeds where Ulysses failed because he accepts the limitations of human knowledge and the need for faith. Dante accepts the medieval synthesis, in which "the scattered elements unite, / bound all with love into one book of praise."[90] He accepts that the profundities of heaven are beyond human comprehension: "their essence is a matter of faith alone."[91] He accepts that those profundities are also beyond human speech: "From this point on / Whatever human language can convey / must yield to vision, passing the extreme."[92] Dante the pilgrim yields to the vision, embraces the faith, and finds in a mystical union with God the Love that was first inspired by Beatrice:

> Already were all my will and my desires
> turned—as a wheel in equal balance—by
> The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.[93]

And yet the seeds of doubt planted earlier in the poem blossom even in paradise. Dante gives us the noble example of Ulysses, who never repents his unwillingness to temper his search for truth and virtue. He includes an oblique reference to Francesca, who never repents the earthly love for which she is condemned. And when Dante asks how divine justice could condemn the virtuous pagans who knew not Christ through no fault of their own, he is told that it is "unfathomable" and that he simply must accept that "all things are just, as chiming with" the primal Will and highest Good.[94] The man who would contest such things, he is told, "would find good cause for doubting every day."[95] Paradise seems to require precisely the willful blindness engendered by the river Lethe.

The medieval synthesis was a fulfillment for some but a prison for others. Ulysses did not recognize divine constraints on human striving. During the Renaissance and beyond, increasing numbers will also challenge those constraints and "find good cause for doubting every day." The quest for knowledge will not be satisfied to remain within the limits imposed by faith. Far from drinking the waters of forgetfulness, scholars and poets alike will strive to recall and reengage their classical, pagan past and to celebrate their present earthly existence.

Perhaps the medieval synthesis was just another siren's song that promised all and never followed through. Yet the beauty of Dante's vision, the power of his poetry, and the soul-searing realism of his portraits remain. This is more than enough to sustain the *Commedia*, so fully does it please.

# Chapter 9

# BOCCACCIO AND THE ART OF THE STORY

When Francesca describes to Dante how she and Paolo drifted insensibly from reading to sex, she exclaims, "*Galeotto fu 'l libro e chi lo scrisse!*" which is generally translated as "A pander was that author, and his book!"[1] But *Galeotto* is not the word for "pander"; it is a proper name. It refers to Prince Gallehault, who, in a French version of the King Arthur romance, encourages the relationship between his friend Lancelot and King Arthur's wife, Guinevere. Prince Galeotto, to use the Italian spelling, indulges and promotes the consummation of their physical desires.

Giovanni Boccaccio titles his collection of one hundred stories, or *novelle*, *Decameron, also known as Prince Galeotto*. He is not merely being facetious in his choice of a subtitle; he is certainly indicating that his stories will take an indulgent attitude toward illicit sex. And whereas Francesca merely says, "We read no more that day," and leaves the rest to the imagination, we can expect the author of "Prince Galeotto" to be far more explicit about sex, as indeed he is, employing a lively array of vivid metaphors and highly suggestive circumlocutions, even as he avoids explicit obscenities.

But Boccaccio is also making a deeper point by referencing the *Commedia* in his subtitle. Boccaccio, in his *Amorosa Visione*, called Dante "the teacher from whom I have all that is good."[2] He was steeped in the *Commedia* and would later embark on a detailed commentary on that poem. Yet he also felt compelled to distinguish himself as an author and to strike out on a new literary path.

The parallels between the *Commedia* and the *Decameron* are deliberate. Where Dante gave us one hundred cantos, Boccaccio offers one hundred stories. Both works are written in the Italian vernacular and provide telling descriptions of an array of individuals. The *Decameron* is set in 1348, when Boccaccio was thirty-five, just as the *Commedia* opens when Dante, too, is midway on his journey through life. The *Commedia* begins in static misery, passes through hell, and continues to an earthly paradise before the pilgrim finally ascends to the celestial sphere. The *Decameron* begins with the plague that devastated Florence in 1348 and transitions to a sort of earthly paradise in the Tuscan countryside. But, at the end of the *Decameron*, the little *brigata* that gathers to sing, to dance, and to tell one another stories simply returns to Florence and everyday life. There is no celestial transition. There is no other world at all. Neither heaven nor hell plays any part in the stories.

That is not to say that Boccaccio, when he wrote the *Decameron*, was an atheist or an agnostic. He became a cleric in 1360, and although it is possible to attribute that decision to a spiritual crisis, it seems unlikely that Boccaccio was not a believer even before then. But Boccaccio was quite deliberate in wanting to create a purely human comedy appropriate to his time and place. There are plenty of religious characters in the *Decameron*, including avaricious clerics, hypocritical abbots, and lustful nuns. But God is altogether absent. So, too, is God's judgment, which is such a powerful (if sometimes inexplicable) force in the *Commedia*. The *Decameron* is a relentlessly secular book with an easy tolerance for, and a comic enjoyment of, human fallibility.

As in Dante, love is the driving force behind all human actions. But love in Boccaccio is not a stepping-stone to the divine. Love is a stepping-stone to sex and other material rewards, and the obstacles between attraction and consummation are a test of ingenuity in which the women more than hold their own with the men. More generally, the *Decameron* itself is a stepping-stone between the feudal, courtly world of the High Middle Ages, with its fixed social structure and strong church presence, and the bustling, socially mobile, secular world of merchants, bankers, and artisans. Sexual desire, the pursuit of money, and a concern for reputation all contribute to the earthy vitality of this burgeoning middle class. Success depends not upon divine providence but on raw cunning and sheer luck, as his characters strive against the caprices of fortune and the conflicting desires of others. The ink was barely dry on Dante's medieval synthesis before Boccaccio respectfully but firmly set it aside, even as he learned from Dante's vivid portrayal of a wide array of characters.

The Tuscan trio of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio has, since 1400,

justly been considered the three crowns of Italian literature. Petrarch, in a letter to Boccaccio, chafed at his presumptive place behind Dante.[3] But Boccaccio himself was content with the third spot. He even wrote admiring biographies of the other two. Yet Boccaccio was in many ways the most versatile and inventive of the three. The *Decameron* was hugely popular throughout Europe and strongly influenced the development of a pan-European, vernacular literature. Most important, Boccaccio was the first great writer to grapple with the role of literature and the nature of wisdom in a postmedieval, secular world. He may properly be considered the father of prose fiction.

## LIFE

Boccaccio was born in 1313, either in Florence or just outside, in the small Tuscan town of Certaldo. The identity of his mother is not known. Boccaccio liked to hint that she was a French noblewoman, but that suggestion owed more to imagination than fact. All we know is that, whoever she was, she was not married to his father, Boccaccino di Chellino. Boccaccino, who worked for Bardi, a prominent Florentine merchant banking company, immediately acknowledged and supported his son. Boccaccio had moved into his father's house by 1320. Boccaccino there provided him with a stepmother (who, interestingly, was a relative of Dante's Beatrice) and a half brother. More important, he provided him with a good, basic education. Boccaccio himself would build on that foundation for the rest of his life.

In 1327, Boccaccino moved to the kingdom of Naples as the chief representative of Bardi. Boccaccio went with him and worked as an apprentice banker, starting at the age of fourteen. He loved Naples. It was a highly cultured city, with a sophisticated court and an active cadre of writers and scholars. The High Middle Ages, for Boccaccio, were embodied in Naples—the feudal system, the knights and noble ladies, and the cult of chivalry and courtly love.

Dante had his Beatrice; Petrarch would have his Laura. Boccaccio's inamorata was named Fiammetta, which is also the title of one of his early poems. Whether she was a literary conceit or an actual woman with whom he had an affair is unclear. Perhaps she was a bit of both. Regardless, Boccaccio, in the fashion of the time, needed his very own muse, even if he had to invent her. He would also use her name for one of the storytellers in the *Decameron*.

After six years in the counting house (time he later lamented as wasted), Boccaccio convinced his father to let him drop the apprenticeship and study canon law instead. But he was not very serious about that either. He wanted to be a poet. His father, a more practical man, kept him to his studies.

After thirteen years in Naples, Boccaccio reluctantly returned to Florence in 1340 or 1341. The house of Bardi had gone bankrupt, and his father was in greatly straitened circumstances. The Bardi bank later rebounded and would play an important role in bringing Chaucer to Florence in 1373, where he may have met the aging Boccaccio or was at least exposed to his works. But it was the collapse of Bardi that played such a critical part in Boccaccio's development as a writer.

Florence was a shock to Boccaccio. Naples still clung to a leisured and refined courtly existence. The social and political life was focused exclusively on the nobility. Florence was a bustling merchant town. Nobles could not even hold political office; various sectors of the burgeoning middle class vied for power. Business success, not aristocratic refinement, was the ultimate mark of distinction. Shrewdness and ambition were the most admired virtues. Boccaccio's greatest work would deal with this tension, adapting the literary refinement of Naples to the everyday realities of Florence. It would become the first work of literature concerned with the middle class.

Boccaccio was tall and on the stout side, with an appealing rather than handsome face and a gentle disposition. He was a great conversationalist and had many friends. He also fathered at least five illegitimate children, though none appears to have survived into adulthood.

Boccaccio wrote widely both in Latin and in the vernacular. His *Filostrato*, which tells the story of the Trojan warrior Troilus and his faithless Cressida, was retold by both Chaucer and Shakespeare. Later in life, he wrote a number of important scholarly works focused on the classics. He studied and promoted the study of the Greek language. He worked ceaselessly, yet he was never financially successful and led a precarious existence. Boccaccio lacked a solid, generous patron of the sort that Dante and Petrarch attracted. He was perhaps too proud to solicit patronage. As one near contemporary noted, “He preferred to enjoy his freedom quietly, without obligations, rather than to lose it in the pursuit of wealth and in the bothersome duties of the courts.”[4]

Boccaccio was only eight years old when Dante died. But he became close friends with Petrarch, who was nine years his senior and already famous when they met in 1350, while Boccaccio was in the midst of writing the *Decameron*. They corresponded throughout their lives and visited one another whenever possible. Each wore a ring engraved with the other's likeness.

But Petrarch, who was unimpressed by the *Commedia*, was also blind to the merits of the *Decameron*. When Boccaccio proudly sent him a copy, Petrarch excused himself for not having read much of it. "It is a very big volume," he wrote, "written in prose and for the multitude. I have been, moreover, occupied with more serious business, and much pressed for time…. What I did was to run through your book, like a traveler who, while hastening forward, looks about him here and there, without pausing."[5] That is an unpromising start, and it gets worse. "If the humor is a little too free at times, this may be excused in view of the age at which you wrote [Boccaccio was 37!], the style and language which you employ, and the frivolity of the subjects, and of the persons who are likely to read such tales." Petrarch acknowledges that there are "some serious and edifying things" in the work but declines to pass judgment on them given that he has not examined the work thoroughly.[6]

It is astonishing and a credit to his innate modesty and mild disposition that Boccaccio remained friends with Petrarch after receiving such an insufferable letter. Unfortunately, however, Boccaccio seems to have taken the criticism seriously and became more of a humanist scholar in the mode of Petrarch. He wrote thereafter mostly in Latin and never duplicated the literary brilliance of the *Decameron*. Boccaccio did, however, exact a measure of revenge when he sent a letter to Petrarch in 1353 harshly criticizing his decision to accept the patronage of Giovanni Visconti, the lord of Milan, which was then at war with Florence. Boccaccio accused Petrarch of humbling himself to a tyrant and compromising his humanist ideals.[7]

Boccaccio was entrusted by Florence with a series of diplomatic missions. But he left the city after a planned uprising against some of the most powerful families was exposed and several of his friends were exiled. He gave up his house in Florence to his half brother and retired to Certaldo. Boccaccio returned briefly, and in great excitement, to Naples after receiving an invitation to reside at the Neapolitan court. But the return proved a disappointment. Boccaccio considered himself shamefully neglected at court and left after six months. After that experience, he rejected other such invitations, preferring to retain his freedom and independence in Certaldo.

Boccaccio officially became a cleric in 1360 after Pope Innocent VI absolved him of his illegitimate status. Fortunately, he did not wholly disown the book that would make him immortal. He made a fair revision of the *Decameron* by hand in 1370–71, and that manuscript is still intact today. Boccaccio died on December 21, 1375, at the age of sixty-two. He was partway through delivering a series of public lectures in Florence on the *Commedia*. Petrarch predeceased

him by seventeen months; Dante by fifty-four years.

## FRAMING THE NARRATIVES

The *Decameron* consists of one hundred stories told over a period of ten days by ten young Florentines—seven women and three men—who have fled the city to escape, however briefly, the ravages of the Black Death. The stories cover the entire Mediterranean world, from Britain and Portugal to Alexandria and the Holy Land. Like the *Canterbury Tales*, which they heavily influenced, the stories contain an array of characters of all classes and professions, including monarchs, sultans, knights, noblewomen, clerics, friars, nuns, scholars, doctors, lawyers, painters, millers, gardeners, merchants, innkeepers, moneylenders, pirates, prostitutes, and tomb robbers, to name just a few.

Boccaccio gives unity and structure to this varied collection by placing the stories within three different frames. First, the author himself addresses the reader directly in the preface, at the beginning of the fourth day, and in the conclusion. For ease of reference, we will attribute these authorial interjections to Boccaccio, although the authorial persona is itself a creation of Boccaccio, just as Dante the pilgrim is a creation of Dante the poet and as Boethius the prisoner is a creation of Boethius the philosopher.

In the preface, Boccaccio notes that he himself once burned with an exalted, unrequited passion that caused him great pain. He was saved only by the conversation and consolation of his friends. His love gradually abated, as all earthly things do, and the recollection of that love now gives him only pleasurable feelings. He echoes the Trojan hero Aeneas, who, during a violent storm at sea, encouraged his men by asserting, “A joy it will be one day, perhaps, to remember even this.”[8]

“It is a matter of humanity to show compassion for those who suffer,” Boccaccio explains.[9] And, in light of the comfort he once received from his friends, Boccaccio feels a special obligation and ability to reciprocate. His book, therefore, will provide relief from the pangs of love. This *Remedia Amoris*, to use the title of one of Ovid's works, is offered in particular to women. Men can distract themselves and relieve their melancholy by plunging into business affairs or by going out to hunt and ride and gamble. But women—at least the leisured noble ladies to whom Boccaccio directs his remarks—have no such outlets for their suppressed emotions. “Restrained by the desires,

whims, and commands of their fathers, mothers, brothers, and husbands, most of the time women remain pent up within the narrow confines of their rooms, and as they sit there in apparent idleness, both yearning and not yearning at the same time, the varied thoughts they mull over in their minds cannot always be happy ones."[10]

It is to these women whom Boccaccio offers his work. He promises that they will find, in the varied *novelle*, both pleasure and useful advice, "for the stories will teach them how to recognize what they should avoid, and likewise, what they should pursue."[11] In other words, he claims that his work will have a practical, moral application as well as affording entertainment and alleviating suffering. It is a bold, expansive claim and rather surprising in light of the salacious content of many of the stories. We will discuss how well it is fulfilled in the last section of this chapter. But one thing to note at the outset is how important the role of women will be in the book, not just as its intended audience but as seven of the ten storytellers, and as key protagonists in most of the stories. We might err in calling Boccaccio a protofeminist, particularly in view of some of his later writings. But no one can deny that, on the whole, women in the *Decameron* are more than equal to the men in intelligence, vitality, and their ability to drive the action. Both Chaucer and Shakespeare clearly learned from Boccaccio in that regard.

The second frame for the individual stories is provided by the plague. The Black Death, which originated in central Asia and spread via the Silk Road and other trade routes, ravaged Europe between 1347 and 1351. More than thirty-five million people, at least one-third of the population of Europe, died. Florence was hit particularly hard. Both Boccaccio's father and stepmother died from it. In the introduction, Boccaccio as author chronicles the complete breakdown of moral, familial, social, and political life in the city. Death was no respecter of class or piety or sex, he writes. "Against it all human wisdom and foresight were useless."[12] The disease spread on the slightest contact. The prayers of the priests and the ministrations of the doctors were equally unavailing.

Boccaccio offers a particularly graphic and gruesome description of the progress of the disease, which began with swelling in the groin or the armpits. These lumps (or *buboes*) led to the name "bubonic" plague, which was the predominate strain. It was also called the Black Death because portions of the body, beginning with the arms and legs, would turn black from internal bleeding.[13]

Even more troubling for the reader, though, is Boccaccio's description of the erosion of basic human bonds. The sick were shunned and left to die, even by their closest relatives:

> Leaving aside the fact that the citizens avoided one another, that almost no one took care of his neighbors, and that relatives visited one another infrequently, if ever, and always kept their distance, the tribulation of the plague had put such fear into the hearts of men and women that brothers abandoned their brothers, uncles their nephews, sisters their brothers, and very often wives their husbands. In fact, what is even worse, and almost unbelievable, is that fathers and mothers refused to tend to their children and take care of them, treating them as if they belonged to someone else.[14]

Some fled the city or shut themselves up in isolation and ate and drank as little as possible. Others abandoned themselves to drink and physical pleasure and every other sort of merriment. A sort of mass hysteria took hold of the populace. Death itself was mocked and treated with indifference. No provision was made for the future. The laws and those in authority were ignored. All modesty was lost, as the sick readily exposed their bodies to whoever might still be willing to attend them. The tradition of mourning by neighbors and relatives quickly lapsed; the dead were left on the sidewalks, gathered onto biers, and flung into mass graves without ceremony.

Boccaccio's vivid description of the plague of 1348 rivals the accounts in Thucydides and, later, Lucretius of the plague in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. It serves the same purpose, functioning as a broader metaphor for the fragility of human life and civilization. We take great pride in the culture we have created. But the ties that seemed to bind us together—as family members, neighbors, and fellow citizens—were not proof against the plague. As their self-interest was threatened, "people behaved like wild animals."[15] Florence became a living hell.

The third frame arises from an effort to reconstitute a new social order amidst the fear and chaos of the plague. Boccaccio tells us that one Tuesday morning, seven young women come together by chance at the Church of Santa Maria Novella, the first great basilica in Florence dating from the thirteenth century. Ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-seven, they are all "intelligent, wellborn, attractive, and graced with fine manners and marvelous honesty."[16] They have so far resisted the moral degradation of the plague; they go to church, they care about family, and they retain their modesty and decorum. Boccaccio declines to give their true names, lest they now be embarrassed by the freedom that he will describe. He instead uses names with literary connotations, such as Fiammetta (from his own early love), Lauretta (after Petrarch's Laura), and Elissa (another name for Virgil's Dido). The women are all known to one another as friends, neighbors, or relatives. Dressed in mourning, and having finished their

prayers, they sit in a circle in the nearly empty church, discussing the terrible trials they are enduring.

The oldest of the group, Pampinea (another name borrowed from an earlier Boccaccio work) urges them to band together and leave the city for a time. We sit here, she notes, “as if our sole purpose were to count the number of corpses being carried to their graves.”[17] All their relatives have either died or themselves fled. They live alone in their houses with perhaps a single servant. Meanwhile, lawbreaking in the city is widespread and open. Even those cloistered in convents and monasteries, she insists, have given themselves over to carnal pleasures. They should leave the city, Pampinea proposes, and stay at one or another of their country estates, where the air is fresher, and there pursue “whatever pleasures and amusements the present times offer.”[18]

Filomena (yet another name from Boccaccio's early work) protests that the women need men to look after them, since women “can be quite irrational,” “terribly disorganized,” and “fickle, quarrelsome, suspicious, weak, and fearful.”[19] Without men, she insists, our little company may quickly fall apart. When one of the women expresses her concern that allowing single men to accompany them would expose them to censure, Filomena is forthright in her response: “If I live like an honest woman and my conscience is clear, let people say what they like to the contrary, for God and Truth will take up arms on my behalf.”[20]

Fortunately, three suitable men happen to present themselves at the church, each of whom is in love with one of the women and related to one or more of the others. They readily agree to accompany the ladies. But the men are not the prime movers in the plan or its execution. Pampinea remains the dominant figure.

This small *brigata* of seven women and three men sets off at dawn the very next day, accompanied by four female and three male servants. It is a movement away from death and decay to youthful innocence. They are escaping not so much the plague as the moral effects of the plague. It is an escape through and to literature. Like Virgil's Arcadia or Shakespeare's Forest of Arden, both the characters and the setting are idealized and shaped by art. When they arrive at the first palace, with its lovely gardens, the beds are made, the flowers arranged, and the larder stocked with fine foods and wine.

Pampinea insists that a regular order must be imposed on their activities, “since things that lack order will not last long.”[21] She proposes that they choose a leader and that “the burden and the honor should be assigned to each of us in turn for just one day.”[22] The queen or king will give directions to the servants concerning the meals and accommodations. The ladies and their courtiers will amuse themselves

with dancing, singing, and games. And, in the hottest part of the day, after the main meal, they will tell one another stories. Each person will tell one story—ten a day in total—until the heat will have abated and they can pursue other pleasures. The rotating monarch will set the topic for the day. Fridays will be devoted to religious observance, and Saturdays to fasting and personal hygiene. Thus, it will take two weeks to tell one hundred stories.

The elegiac setting that the *brigata* re-creates is more appropriate to the court of Naples of Boccaccio's youth than to the Florence of his adulthood. It is an Indian summer of the courtly ideal, romantically reenvisioned, in which literature will play a critical role in forging a community of shared values and sympathies. Yet however elegiac the frame, the stories themselves will be of a very different ilk. They are full of earthy exuberance, and they celebrate cleverness, cunning, and even deception. The narrators may have fled the present, but the stories they tell return to life in its often-sordid reality and comic potentiality. The easy grace and refinement of a passing age is retained, not in the subject matter, but in the art and skill of narration.

## RELIGION

Ser Cepparello, the main character in Boccaccio's first story, “was perhaps the worst man who had ever been born.”[23] He never went to church, and he gleefully forged legal documents, supplied false testimony, stirred up enmity and scandal, blasphemed freely, ate and drank to excess, cheated at cards and dice, and “would rob and steal with a conscience like that of a holy man giving alms.”[24]

He is therefore the ideal agent for a merchant who has been knighted and needs to wrap up his business affairs. The merchant has loans out to a number of Burgundians, and, since Burgundians are quarrelsome and untrustworthy by nature, he chooses Cepparello to match their wicked tricks and collect the money they owe. Cepparello, upon arrival in Burgundy, stays at the house of two Florentine brothers who are also moneylenders. But he immediately falls gravely ill and is in danger of death.

The two brothers are put in a difficult situation. If Cepparello dies without confession and absolution, he cannot be buried in consecrated grounds. The brothers will be blamed, and, since they are already disliked as foreign usurers, they fear for their safety. But, if Cepparello does confess, his sins are so great that no priest or friar will absolve

him, and the result will be the same. Cepparello resolves to relieve their difficulty with one final, career-capping deception. As Cepparello explains, “I've done the Lord God so many injuries during my lifetime that doing Him one more at the hour of my death won't make a difference to Him one way or the other.”[25] A renowned friar accordingly is called to hear his confession. Cepparello presents himself to the friar as a man of the utmost piety and devoutness who agonizes over the most innocuous of “sins” committed during an otherwise highly praiseworthy life. The gullible friar takes him for a holy man and, after his death, praises him as a saint. The people, equally gullible, venerate his remains, make vows to him, and claim that he performs miracles and sits among the Blessed in the presence of God.

This is the very first story told on the very first day of the *Decameron*. It is a “free day,” in the sense that the storytellers may choose to speak on any topic they like. There is a heavy concentration of religious stories on the first day. But the stories are not designed to establish a suitably spiritual foundation for what follows. Quite the contrary; Cepparello's story is shocking in its brazenness. He has no sense of sin and no fear of the afterlife. He is sacrilegious even on the verge of death. He certainly would be condemned to a circle deep in Dante's *Inferno*. And yet, as a character in a Boccaccio story, he is delightful and amusing. His confession is a comic masterpiece of skillful manipulation. And the credibility of the friar and the people does credit to neither. Cepparello, the “worst man,” refracted through the prism of the church, comes out looking like a saint.

This inversion of values, moreover, is not an isolated case. It sets the tone for what follows. In the second story, a Christian tries to convert his good friend, a Jew. The Jew finally expresses a willingness to convert but first wants to go to Rome “to see the man who you say is the Vicar of God on earth and to observe his life and habits, and likewise those of his brothers, the cardinals.”[26] The Christian is crestfallen, for he knows full well “the wicked and filthy lives of the clergy” that his friend will discover.[27] And that is exactly what happens. The Jew is a perceptive man, and he finds in Rome a cesspool of wickedness that he can scarcely credit:

> I saw no holiness there, no devotion, no good works or models of life—or of anything else—in any member of the clergy. Instead it seemed to me that lust, avarice, gluttony, fraud, envy, pride, and the like, and worse, if anything worse is possible, had such power over everyone that I consider the place a forge of diabolical works rather than divine ones.[28]

Much to his friend's surprise, however, the Jew announces that he will now become a Christian, for if the church has survived such wickedness, it must be "truer and holier than any other."[29] The irony and the irreverence are equally clear.

This second story—in which the pope and his clergy turn out to be no different than Cepparello in their dedication to wickedness—reaffirms the point of the first: institutional religion is an unreliable guide to human worth. Many other stories in the book bear the same import. Religious practice does not give us a foundational norm for judging human conduct when the church itself is rife with hypocrisy and vice.

Such a message is of course compatible with deep piety. Dante condemns several popes to hell and compares the papacy to the whore of Babylon. Yet he exalts the true faith of Francis and Aquinas from which the church has woefully departed. In the *Decameron*, no such true faith is recognized, as the third story makes clear. In it, Sultan Saladin (who recaptured Palestine from the Crusaders) needs money to fund his wars and wants an excuse to seize the property of a rich Jew named Melchisedech. Accordingly, Saladin asks him to explain "which of the three laws—the Jewish, the Saracen, or the Christian—you think to be the true one."[30] Melchisedech instantly recognizes the trap and tells Saladin a story in response. The story is about a rich and powerful man who had a beautiful and precious ring that he wanted to remain in his family forever. He announced that he would leave it to one of his sons and that "whoever was discovered to have the ring in his possession should be considered his heir, and that all the others should honor and respect him as the head of the family."[31]

This succession worked for several generations until one descendant had three wonderful sons whom he loved equally. Not wanting to choose among them, he had two rings made identical to the first and gave one to each, thus leaving open the question of his true heir. Melchisedech concludes:

> Now, I say the same thing, my lord, about the three laws given by God the Father to the three peoples about whom you questioned me. Each one believes itself to be the rightful possessor of His inheritance, His true law, and His commandments, but as with the rings, the question of who is right is still pending.[32]

Taken together, the first three stories are thoroughly subversive of religious belief. They constitute a humanist manifesto in which religious values and valuations are set aside as unverifiable. Worse, they are inconsistent with human nature. Sexual desire and a longing for material comforts are natural and inescapable. Condemnation

leads not to their suppression but to hypocrisy and deceit in their realization, as further illustrated in the Day 1 stories of the sexually wayward abbot[33] and the avaricious inquisitor.[34] They preach one thing and practice something completely different.

There is a reason later writers have called Boccaccio "the Voltaire of the fourteenth century."[35] In his stories, Boccaccio leaves the theocratic world behind and embraces real men and women as the center of his interest. He is secular with a vengeance, exposing medieval asceticism and mystical exaltation alike as pernicious nonsense. The transcendent values of the Middle Ages, which reached their apotheosis in Francis, Aquinas, and Dante, are simply cast onto the rubbish heap, like the victims of the plague.[36] What will take their place remains to be seen.

## FORTUNE

If the world is not "a unity of order and providence," Marcus Aurelius famously wrote, then it is "a mere hotchpotch of random cohesions and dispersions."[37] Marcus himself believed in divine providence but thought it made no difference in how a person should live his or her life, for we can no more reprimand chance than we can impeach providence. How we respond to the world as it presents itself lies with us.

Something of that attitude permeates the stories of the *Decameron*. With God no longer a protagonist, fortune is random and unpredictable. We have a natural tendency to attribute good luck to God's grace and bad luck to the fickleness of Lady Fortune. But it is all the same without the personifications. The questions are about how we bear it, how we respond to it, and how we might turn it to our advantage. The rest is out of our hands.

The role of fortune is an important theme throughout the ten days, but it predominates in the second day's stories, when the chosen topic is people who, after suffering through many misfortunes, arrive at a happy end they could never have foreseen. Sometimes they are good people; sometimes foolish; and sometimes just clever enough to capitalize on the chances that come their way.

In the penultimate story of Day 2,[38] many of these factors come together. The story begins with a group of traveling merchants in Paris discussing the likely faithlessness of their wives at home. Bernabò, a Genoese merchant, demurs and praises his wife as a model

of perfection and loyalty. Another merchant, Ambruogiuolo, scoffs and, as tempers escalate, bets an enormous sum that he can bed Bernabò's wife. He undertakes to bring back some of her most intimate possessions and to supply particular details as proof.

Bernabò's wife, Zinevra, is indeed virtuous. But Ambruogiuolo is a scoundrel. He pays a large sum to a poor woman of the household to secrete him in a chest in Zinevra's bedroom. Emerging from the chest in the night, he learns the layout and objects in the room, uncovers the sleeping Zinevra to find a large mole under her left breast, and steals several objects belonging to her. He returns to Paris and confronts Bernabò with the supposed proofs of her infidelity. Filled with a murderous rage, Bernabò sends a servant to Genoa with instructions to kill his wife. But the servant takes pity and allows her to flee Italy disguised as a young man. Zinevra (under the name Sicurano) makes her way to Alexandria where she becomes a serving boy to, and soon a favorite of, the sultan.

There, chance takes another turn as a result not of providence but of commerce. Six years pass, and the sultan sends Zinevra to oversee a grand fair of merchants in nearby Acre. There she encounters Ambruogiuolo and some of the items that belonged to her. When she asks about the items, Ambruogiuolo boastfully tells her the whole story. Realizing now what triggered Bernabò's rage, she befriends Ambruogiuolo, convinces him to set up business in Alexandria, and induces him to tell his story of trickery to the sultan.

She then, through some other merchants, arranges for the now impoverished Bernabò also to come to Alexandria. Both men are summoned before the sultan, and Ambruogiuolo is commanded by the sultan to tell his story again, this time in front of Bernabò. Zinevra then throws herself at the feet of the astonished sultan and reveals her true identity. Bernabò, though he deserves death for his own actions, is spared at her request, and the couple returns to Genoa laden with riches. But Ambruogiuolo is tied to a pole in the full sun and smeared with honey. He is tormented and devoured by flies and wasps and horseflies, and his whitened bones are left as a testimony to his wickedness.

This might seem a conventional tale of good prevailing due to divine providence. But it is really nothing of the sort. Zinevra is indeed good, but she prevails because she is clever and resourceful in responding to the buffets of fortune. She is also lucky in that the merchant trade brought Ambruogiuolo to Acre. Commerce has replaced providence as the main engine in human affairs. It occasions her initial downfall and yet gives her a chance to recoup her fortune in the end.

The importance of commerce—and the secondary role of virtue—in the chances of life is underscored in the tale of Landolfo.[39] Landolfo is wealthy and lives along the beautiful Amalfi coast, wanting for nothing. Yet greed impels him to seek to double his wealth through a mercantile venture that goes awry and all but ruins him. He then becomes a pirate in order to recoup his fortune. He very nearly succeeds, plundering a number of Turkish vessels before he is captured and plundered in turn by two large Genoese merchant ships. In an ensuing storm, he all but loses his life when the Genoese ship in which he is being held is driven onto the shoals of the island of Cephalonia and is smashed to pieces. Landolfo saves himself by clinging to a small chest. He finally floats to another island where he is rescued by an old woman, who carefully restores him to health. And to fortune, it turns out. For the chest is full of precious jewels. Borrowing a plain sack from the old woman, and leaving her the empty chest, Landolfo makes his way home with the help of some cloth merchants who are fellow townsmen. There he sells the jewels, which turn out to be worth twice his original fortune. After generously rewarding the old woman and the cloth merchants, Landolfo resolves to have nothing more to do with the merchant trade. He will no longer launch himself on the seas of fortune. Instead, he lives out his remaining life in quiet happiness and ample prosperity in his home town.

Although Landolfo takes the fortuity of the chest as a sign that God had not “decided to abandon him yet,”[40] it is clear that God had no more to do with his good fortune than with his earlier reversal. Landolfo was leading a largely blameless life when his merchant venture collapsed. He was a pirate, “making other people's property his own,”[41] when his fortunes began to turn around. And, although he was at least a resourceful pirate, the chest that finally restores his wealth simply floats to him. All he does is grab hold to save his life. Indeed, once free of the sea, he does not even remember the chest until he is nursed back to health and the old woman returns it to him.

Zinevra did not deserve her bad fortune; nor did Landolfo deserve his good fortune. Andreuccio, a naive horse trader from Perugia, is a slightly different case.[42] He sets off to Naples with a purse full of gold florins and a vague idea of finding cheap horses there. He is soon robbed of his purse in a complicated plot set in motion by a prostitute claiming to be his long-lost sister. The gullible Andreuccio finds himself without clothes or money, and covered in muck from a communal privy into which he has fallen. Yet he soon recoups more than he lost after falling in with tomb robbers seeking to strip a ruby ring from the finger of a recently deceased archbishop. Realizing that the robbers plan to trick him, Andreuccio keeps the ring for himself

but is trapped in the tomb. He escapes only because a second group of tomb robbers, led by a priest, reopens it. They all flee in horror when Andreuccio grabs the priest by the leg and pretends to be trying to pull him down into the tomb. Both the prostitute and Andreuccio are the winners. And the ring, instead of being buried in the tomb that is the church, remains in the flow of commerce, a more than ample substitute for the horses Andreuccio had planned to buy.

In the *Decameron*, fortune deals its cards randomly to the good and the bad, the clever and the foolish. Intelligence and hustle can sometimes evade or soften fortune's blows. But there is a limit to what cleverness alone can accomplish. Good luck is also needed, for divine providence is nowhere to be found.

## THE JOYS OF SEX

What *is* to be found in the *Decameron* is sex—quite a bit of it, actually. It helps fill the void left by the absence of divine providence. The boldest of the men—Dioneo, whose name means lust—tells the first racy story on Day 1. It concerns an abbot who discovers one of the monks "sporting with" a girl in his cell.[43] The monk hears shuffling outside his door, spies the abbot through a tiny hole in the wall, and fears severe punishment. Accordingly, he leaves the girl in his cell with an injunction to stay quiet, locks the door, and delivers the key to the abbot, saying that he has to fetch some wood from the forest. The abbot, seeking to inform himself about the monk's sin, goes to the cell where, naturally, he himself ends up in bed with the girl. Making allowance for his corpulence and her tender years, he puts her on top of him and enjoys himself while the monk, who did not depart for the woods, watches through the hole. Later, when the abbot publicly scolds the monk and threatens to lock him up, the monk responds by noting that he is new to the order and its many rules:

> Up to now you hadn't shown me how monks are supposed to support women just as they support fasts and vigils. But now that you've shown me how, I promise you that if you pardon me this time, I'll never sin that way again. On the contrary, I'll always do exactly what I saw you doing.[44]

The abbot quickly pardons the monk, and after that they share the girl.

The ladies at first are embarrassed by Dioneo's story. But their blushes are soon replaced by grins and, as they steal glances at one

another, outright laughter. Like the abbot, they chide Dioneo a bit for telling such a story in the presence of ladies, but, also like the abbot, the ladies themselves soon join in the fun. This accounts for the low tone—deplored by Petrarch and later condemned by the church—that has made the book so enduringly popular.

Many of these lively stories concern the hypocrisy of the clergy, who profess chastity but nonetheless feel, as the abbot did, "the prickings of the flesh that burned in him as much as in the young monk."[45] Frate Alberto, a less than pious Franciscan, convinces a vain and foolish woman that the angel Gabriel is in love with her and wants to visit her in the form of a man. The human form the angel chooses is, conveniently, that of Frate Alberto: "Many times that night he took flight without wings, causing the lady to cry out loud with satisfaction at what he did, which he supplemented by telling her all about the glories of Heaven."[46]

Dom Felice, a young monk, realizes that Monna Isabetta is starved for physical affection because her overly devout husband, who everyone called Frate Puccio, is always fasting, praying, and even flagellating himself. Deciding to offer himself as a substitute, the monk clears the way by devising an elaborate penance for the husband that involves his gazing motionless at the heavens during the entire night in the posture of Christ on the cross. As the now happy wife tells Dom Felice, "You made Frate Puccio do the penance, but we're the ones who've gained Paradise."[47]

Alibech, a beautiful but naive young girl, goes to visit the desert fathers to learn from their holiness. One of these hermits, Rustico, takes her in with the best of intentions but is not proof against temptation. He convinces her that the act they could perform most pleasing to God is to "put the Devil back in…Hell."[48] Though perplexed that she has no devil of her own, but only hell in its place, Alibech responds quite willingly. Indeed, "they put the Devil back in there a good six times before they got out of bed, so that, when they were done, they had forced him to lower his proud head, and he was content to be quiet a while."[49] Alibech decides that serving God in this way is most delightful. But, alas, Rustico lives on the roots of herbs and spring water, and can never summon the devil enough to satisfy hell.

Nor are nuns and abbesses deprived of the fun. As one of the storytellers remarks, it is foolish to believe that, when a young woman takes the veil, "she is no longer a woman and no longer feels female cravings, as though when she became a nun, she was turned into a stone." In one story,[50] an abbess is summoned in the night when a young novice is discovered with her lover. The surprised and flustered abbess, who was herself in bed with a priest, dresses hurriedly in the

dark and rushes to confront the girl, adjusting her pleated veil. She scolds the girl mercilessly in front of the other nuns until the mortified novice raises her eyes and realizes that on the abbess's head is not a veil but a pair of men's breeches. After that, the abbess admits that the goadings of the flesh cannot be denied and suggests that they should all enjoy themselves where they can, provided it is done discreetly. She then returns to bed with her priest.

In another, a handsome young laborer, Masetto, pretends to be a deaf-mute in order to get a job as gardener in a convent renowned for its holiness. Two of the nuns, thinking him a simpleton but eager to find out whether being with a man is as great a pleasure as some say, take turns with him inside his modest hut. With a great many puns about working the garden and where to put the hoe, Masetto begins to sow his seeds more widely. He becomes so exhausted that he sleeps most of the day. The abbess finds him asleep in the shade of an almond tree, with his tunic blown back by the wind, leaving him entirely exposed. The abbess herself is not proof against desire, and she takes Masetto back to her room for several days, provoking complaints from the other nuns that their garden has not been tended. Masetto drops his deaf-mute ruse and protests that he cannot maintain his current workload: “from doing what I've been doing up to now, I've reached the point where I can't do just about anything anymore.”[51] The wise abbess consults with her nuns, and they work out a new arrangement. Announcing to the public that Masetto has been cured through their prayers—which only enhances the reputation of the convent—they make him their steward and divide his labors so that he can take care of them all.

As the stories of Rustico and Masetto indicate, the reality of masculine prowess generally falls short of both masculine fantasy and feminine desire. There are several stories of young wives who, left unsatisfied by their older husbands, find their pleasure elsewhere. Sexual fulfillment is treated as a natural and inalienable right. A gentlewoman, Madonna Filippa, is discovered by her husband in bed with her lover. He takes her to court and demands that she be put to death in accordance with the law. The high-spirited Madonna Filippa mounts her own defense. She does not deny her “crime” but insists that the law is unjust because it was passed only by men with no women present or consulted and without consideration of the fact that “us poor women…are much better than men at giving satisfaction to a whole host of lovers.”[52] In excellent Socratic style she cross-examines her husband to establish that she has never refused to give herself freely and fully to him whenever, and however many times, he wanted. “Then I ask you,” she says, turning to the court:

> If he's always obtained what he needed from me and was pleased with it, what was I supposed to do—in fact, what am I to do now—with the leftovers? Should I throw them to the dogs? Isn't it much better to serve some of them up to a gentleman who loves me more than his very own life than to let them go to waste or have them spoil?[53]

The crowded courtroom roars its approval. Madonna Filippa is acquitted, and the statute is modified. In this merchant society, a woman's sexuality is property that she is free to dispose of at her own pleasure, provided her husband gets his due share. Indeed, the collective import of these stories from "Prince Galeotto" seems clear: sexual activity is so natural and pleasurable that the church makes a terrible mistake, and engenders only misery and hypocrisy, in condemning and attempting to suppress it.

Yet, despite the ribald stories, and their subversive message, the little *brigata* remains chaste and observes all propriety. It is a curious twist, which seems to relegate any imagined emancipation to the realm of literature. Then again, Boccaccio himself was the father of five illegitimate children. How the realism of the stories connects with the romanticism of the frame remains to be seen.

## LOVE AND DECEPTION

In his chapter on Boccaccio in *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach praises the author's ability to "grasp the sensory reality of passing life" and claims that Boccaccio gives us "the first literary prose of postclassical Europe."[54] But Auerbach also suggests that Boccaccio treats the literary presentation of "life's colorful reality" as a mere diversion, a form of entertainment for his elegant storytellers, who always maintain a critical and moral distance from their subject matter.[55] Boccaccio is at his best in stories with a happy ending, Auerbach argues; he "becomes weak and superficial as soon as the problematic or the tragic is touched upon."[56]

The contention that Boccaccio views literature as a mere diversion is mistaken, as we will discuss in the last section of this chapter. But it is true that he is ill at ease with the deeper tones of tragedy. That is evident when Day 4's king, himself unrequited in love, calls for stories about those whose love comes to an unhappy end. The first such story concerns Ghismunda,[57] a widowed princess whose overly fond father, Tancredi, fails to arrange a second marriage for her in order to keep

her to himself. Ghismunda, who is still young and lively, resolves to take a lover and chooses Guiscardo, a man of humble birth but noble bearing. She develops elaborate safeguards so that they can meet in secret. Tancredi nonetheless discovers the affair by accident. When confronted, Ghismunda neither apologizes nor begs forgiveness. She defends her right to satisfy her desires as well as her choice of a lover, who, though low born, is a true nobleman. Ghismunda challenges Tancredi either to forgive them both or kill them both, for she insists that she will not survive her lover. Tancredi, who does not believe his daughter's resolve is genuine, has Guiscardo strangled. He sends Ghismunda a golden chalice. In it is her lover's heart. After weeping for her lost love, Ghismunda fills the chalice with poison and drinks it.

Ghismunda's speech of defiance is lofty in tone and sentiment. It approximates the speech of a tragic heroine. And yet the story, with its grisly, gothic ending, is more melodrama than tragedy. To call the stories of the fourth day superficial may be too harsh, but they are the weakest in the book, and even the storytellers—who left Florence to escape the misery of the plague—express their dislike of the outcomes. Indeed, Pampinea defies the king by interposing the story of Frate Alberto which, although it ends badly for the would-be angel Gabriel when his fraud is exposed, is thoroughly comic in tone. And the following day's queen insists on stories of lovers who, following severe trials, find happiness. In that genre, Boccaccio and his *brigata* are more at home.

The story of the nightingale on Day 5 is a useful antidote to the tragedy of Ghismunda. In it, a young girl named Caterina convinces her parents to let her sleep on a balcony overlooking the garden so that she can enjoy the cool of the evening and listen to the song of the nightingale. Ricciardo, the boy she loves, joins her there, and they consummate their love, “delightedly making the nightingale sing over and over again.”[58] They are still there the next morning, lying naked in one another's arms, when they are discovered by Caterina's father. “Quick, woman, get up,” he tells his wife. “Come see how fond your daughter is of the nightingale, for she's captured it, and she's holding it in her hand.”[59] When Ricciardo sees the father, he feels “as though his heart had been ripped out of his body,”[60] a clear reference to the fate of Guiscardo. But Ricciardo is rich and noble, so the only price he pays for his misdeed is to marry Caterina. As Shakespeare would later underscore in *Romeo and Juliet*, where the two young lovers also meet on a balcony, the line between romantic comedy and tragedy is a fine one, indeed. Shakespeare was at home on both sides of that line; Boccaccio, only on the side of comedy.

Boccaccio is also thoroughly at home in dissecting and describing

all the tricks and deceptions that people play on one another in order to satisfy their desires. That is the focus of Days 7 and 8. Up to then, intelligence, along with ingenuity and determination, are used largely to turn bad fortune into good: to reunite families, restore fortunes, and join young lovers together. Day 6 is devoted wholly to clever quips and quick comebacks that are themselves sufficient to transform a situation to the speaker's advantage. But intelligence is not always a force for good, as Days 7 and 8 illustrate. Once again, Dioneo introduces the subversive element by setting the topic on Day 7 as tricks that women play on their husbands, either for the sake of love or for self-preservation.

The stories start comically enough. They focus on ways in which wandering wives escape detection or punishment by their jealous husbands. The husbands, in their bullying obtuseness, generally deserve to be made the dupes, and the narrative skill is such that the reader's sympathies are usually with the wives, despite their infidelity. One of the funniest and most lubricious such stories involves a woman surprised by her husband's sudden return in the middle of the day.[61] She has her lover climb into a large barrel to hide. The unsuspecting husband announces that he has found a buyer for the barrel. The quick-thinking wife says that she, too, has found a buyer who will pay even more and that, in fact, he is inside the barrel inspecting it. The prompted lover climbs out of the barrel, announcing that he will take it as long as the inside is thoroughly cleaned of the crusted-over lees of wine. The husband dutifully climbs in and cleans the barrel, with his wife leaning over the lid and directing him. The lover, meanwhile, comes up behind her and takes his pleasure, finishing at the same moment the husband completes his scraping. He buys the barrel, the husband carries it home for him, and all are satisfied.

As the stories pile up, however, it is clear that they are less about sex than they are about power. They are about women asserting control over their households, the primary sphere in which women of that era were able to exercise power. They use deception, carefully matched to the shortcomings of their spouses, to ensure their own freedom within the domestic space. Cunning is the only weapon at their disposal, and they wield it to get what they want in a social order that is otherwise wholly patriarchal. The effect is one of comic liberation from oppression.

But things turn nasty on Day 8. The topic is tricks that people play on one another more generally. Sex is treated by some women as a commodity rather than the innocent offering of love or lust, and they are punished by their lovers for their avarice. Swindlers, too, are swindled in turn. Humiliation and beatings are used to puncture pretension or punish presumption. In the most disturbing of these

stories a scholar in love with a widow is forced to spend a freezing night on his feet in a locked garden while the widow and her lover mock him.[62] He exacts a revenge that, even if proportionate to what he suffered, seems sadistic and excessive.

As Wayne Rebhorn explains in the introduction to his translation of the *Decameron*, the stories of Day 7 and, particularly, Day 8 thoroughly undermine the group's "collective fantasy" that social harmony is possible and that jealousy, ambition, lust, and greed can somehow be kept in check.[63] The idyllic literary experiment of the little *brigata* is succumbing to realism. The courtly ideals with which they began are in shambles.

## LIBERALITY AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

The tenth, and final, day is devoted to stories about men and women who have displayed liberality and magnanimity. These stories are a deliberate restorative after the socially destructive deceptions of Days 7 and 8 that spill over even into the free choice of Day 9. The little *brigata* cannot depart on such a note, and they seek to restore the harmony among intelligence, desire, and the social order in which they began. The key to that harmony is thought to be an unselfish willingness to restrain desire and to shape action in favor of the common good. Whether the stories fully bear that out is another matter.

In several stories, kings do restrain their own desires and exercise their power responsibly for the good of those they govern. In others, generosity shown by one person inspires it in others. Yet another story —in which a betrothed gives up his fiancée, Sophronia, to a friend who has conceived a passion for her—turns into an elaborate allegory of the transfer of wisdom and culture from Greece to Rome. But magnificence or liberality is sometimes treated not as a social and moral obligation so much as an enhancement to reputation, "which, just as the sun embellishes and adorns the whole of the heavens, gives light and splendor to every other virtue."[64]

As with sex and power, the desire for glorious renown has its dark side. This is illustrated in the story of Nathan and Mithridanes.[65] Nathan builds a series of magnificent palaces on a key east–west road. There, with his large group of servants and vast wealth, he lavishly entertains all who pass. As his fame grows, it incites the jealously of Mithridanes, who himself wants to be known as the most courteous

and generous of men. Unable to better Nathan's display, Mithridanes resolves to kill him. Nathan learns of the plot but, unwilling to deny a guest anything, offers his life to Mithridanes as well as advice about how to escape without detection. Thwarted, Mithridanes acknowledges that he can never match such a lofty spirit and falls at Nathan's feet. Nathan raises him, forgives him, and embraces him, thereby underscoring that Nathan's liberality can never be surpassed.

The overall effect of these stories is decidedly ambiguous. In a society marred by unbridled desire and avarice, liberality and a concern for public admiration are useful constraints. They may even merge into genuine love and devotion. But competitive magnificence can be just as destructive as sexual rivalry and financial fraud.

The ambiguity of goodness is nowhere more evident than in the final story of the collection, told, naturally, by Dioneo. A beautiful peasant girl named Griselda is chosen to be the wife of the local marquis, but only after she agrees that she will act always to please him, never get upset with him, and be obedient to him. He has her stripped naked of her rags in front of his entire company and then clothed magnificently to underscore that she owes her fairy-tale transformation solely to him. But life with the marquis proves far from enchanted. Griselda herself is always charming and well mannered. She wins the love of her husband's subjects and is so attentive to his needs that he considers himself the happiest of men, especially when she gives birth to their first child, a girl. Yet perversity prevails. He decides to test his wife with a series of trials so cruel that they are painful even to relate. Griselda becomes a medieval Job tormented without reason by her lord and master. He berates her for her low birth and tells her that his vassals are unhappy that he married her and are unwilling to recognize the daughter. He has the girl taken away from her and borne off to her apparent death. He does the same a few years later with a boy child. Finally, after thirteen years of such treatment, the marquis tells Griselda that he is repudiating the marriage, by special dispensation from the church, and has chosen a noblewoman for his proper bride. He orders Griselda to organize the wedding festivities and then sends her back to her father barefoot and wearing nothing but an old shift. Throughout this ordeal, Griselda bears everything with patience, never changing her expression and never reproaching her husband, saying only, “My lord,…do with me whatever you think best for your honor and your peace of mind, and I will be entirely content with it.”[66] Even when the servant comes for her daughter, all she will tell him is to “do exactly what your lord, who is my lord as well, has ordered, but don't leave her to be devoured by the beasts and the birds unless he's told you to do so.”[67]

The marquis brings her back to witness the wedding. The

apparent bride is a twelve-year-old girl, and Griselda praises her beauty and refinement. Having taken his “test” to its ultimate extreme, without any sign that Griselda will deviate from his wishes, the marquis declares himself satisfied that he has taught Griselda “how to be a wife,” and his subjects “how to manage one.”[68] He presents the bride and her brother as Griselda's daughter and son, who had been raised all this time with care by the marquis's relatives in Bologna. Calling this “the sweetest of cures to heal the wounds I gave you,” the marquis foretells a future of marital and familial bliss.[69]

Petrarch lauded the story of Griselda and even translated it into Latin, which he clearly thought improved on the original by making the language as edifying as the content. In his letter to Boccaccio, Petrarch said he wanted his readers to “emulate the example of feminine constancy and to submit themselves to God with the same courage as did this woman to her husband.”[70] Modern criticism is sometimes to the same effect: “In her earthly perfection,” one scholar writes, “Griselda…represents the liaison between reality and myth, the reality of the morally frail womanhood portrayed in most of the *Decameron*, and the myth of the cherished Christian ideal of perfection in women as signified and exalted by Dante and Petrarch.”[71] Such critics find it appropriate that the *Decameron* begins with Cepparello, “the worst man who had ever been born,” and ends with Griselda, the perfect woman, as if the book were a primer on the stages of moral development.

But that surely was not Boccaccio's intent, and the book cannot sensibly be read in that light. Recall that Dioneo (who seems to stand closest to Boccaccio himself) is the most consistently subversive of the storytellers. Griselda is a problem, not a paragon. She not only meekly suffers the vicious abuse of her husband; she allows her innocent children to be taken from her and, apparently, killed, without a whimper of protest. At least Job protested against his undeserved misfortunes. Griselda's monstrous self-abnegation simply encourages what Dioneo rightly calls the “senseless brutality” of her husband.[72] The marquis is “better suited to tending pigs than ruling men,” yet he is rewarded with perfect marital bliss and “a long, contented life with Griselda.”[73] That is hardly a moral tale, and Griselda is no heroine. In a book full of vibrant, smart, and active women, Griselda's self-effacement denudes her of all personality. Even Cepparello is more human and recognizable and, frankly, far more interesting. Even Dante's Beatrice shows more fire in heaven than Griselda does in the hell designed for her by the marquis.

As the problem of Griselda makes clear, there are no simplistic moral lessons to be drawn from the *Decameron*. Nor does the *brigata* itself undergo any transformation. On the fifteenth day, they simply walk back to plague-gripped Florence. When they take their leave of one another at their starting point in Santa Maria Novella, the women return to their homes, and the men go "off to pursue other pleasures of theirs."[74] Their daily lives appear to continue as they were before, almost as if the idyllic interlude in the countryside never happened.

The king who set the topic for the final day expressed his belief that the stories would "assuredly enflame you, well disposed as your spirits already are, to perform worthy deeds."[75] Yet there is no sign of that, and indeed the same king stressed that the other, less edifying stories have had no noticeable effect in arousing carnal desire or other improper behavior: "our activities have been marked from start to finish by a sense of propriety, harmony, and fraternal friendship."[76] But that in itself is an important point. Despite the plague—an actual horrific event but also a convenient metaphor for death, terror, and social strife—they have preserved their humanity and decency, and they have done so at least in part through literature, by telling one another stories.

Boccaccio's *Decameron* appears to have circulated piecemeal, perhaps as each day's group of ten stories was completed. At the beginning of the fourth day, Boccaccio as author reinserts himself in the narrative and addresses his "dearest ladies" directly to offer a "few slight rejoinders" to his critics.[77] He reverts to these same criticisms in the "Author's Conclusion." Some of the imagined criticisms are whimsical (he likes ladies too much, the stories are not true, some of them are too long). But two of them are addressed with care. First, it is said that the stories are immoral and will corrupt their readers. Second, it is said that it is unbecoming for a serious man to have written such insubstantial tales. That is, "it would be wiser for me to stay with the Muses in Parnassus than to be with you and to busy myself with this nonsense."[78]

Rather than responding directly, Boccaccio tells another story, about a man who, having lost his beloved wife, gave away all he had and retired to a remote mountain hermitage with his two-year-old son. For sixteen years the boy lived there in complete isolation with no knowledge of the outside world. The father taught him nothing but prayers and spoke to him only about the glories of eternal life with God. Finally, when the boy is eighteen, the now aging father takes him on one of the father's periodic trips to Florence to obtain supplies,

assuming that the boy is by now immune to such temptation.

The boy is awestruck by the palaces, houses, and churches, and the busy city life. He asks his father endless questions, wanting to know what each thing is called and its purpose. They then come across a company of beautiful, well-dressed women returning from a wedding. The father insists that the boy should not even look at them, but the boy wants to know what they are called. Unwilling to give them their proper name, the father says, "They're called goslings."[79] The boy immediately loses interest in all the other things he has seen in the city. These goslings are the most wonderful of all. "Father," he cries, "please arrange it so that I can have one of those goslings." "Be quiet," says the father. "They're evil."[80] But the boy will not hold his tongue. They are beautiful, he insists, and he will have one of his own and take care of feeding it. The father "realized that his wits were no match for Nature, and he regretted that he had ever brought his son to Florence."[81]

With this partial story, Boccaccio has deftly answered both criticisms. Taking a clear look at the world around one and giving each thing a fitting name is a worthy as well as delightful endeavor. It is not a virtue to be, or to pretend to be, "entirely ignorant about the pleasures and power of natural affection."[82] A supposedly improper story can no more harm a well-disposed nature "than mud can sully the rays of the sun, or earthly filth, the beauties of the heavens."[83] The analogy is an apt one because prose fiction is like the rays of the sun casting their illumination on the everyday concerns and actions of men and women. The light itself is beautiful even if what it reveals may offend prudes and hypocrites.

Herein lies the importance of the literary frame that Boccaccio has given his work. The storytellers themselves are elegant and virtuous even when their subject matter is not: "there is no story so unseemly that it may not be told, provided it is couched in seemly language."[84] The refined language of the medieval literature of courtly love is applied to a very different mercantile world. That is why the *Decameron* is such an important transitional work. The idealized *brigata* is unchanged—they retain their values of propriety, harmony, and fraternal friendship—but "the things of this world," Boccaccio insists, "are completely unstable and endlessly changing."[85] And only literature offers us a chance to impose a kind of order on that world: to call things by their proper names.

Boccaccio insists that using vernacular prose to capture such mutability is serious work worthy of serious attention. "We cannot always live with the Muses," he says with mock modesty.[86] That is, we cannot always match the exalted tone of a Homer or a Virgil or a Dante. But ordinary women, Boccaccio notes, have inspired him to

write a thousand lines of poetry, “whereas the Muses never caused me to write anything.”[87] In an affirmation of the importance of vernacular prose fiction, he declares that, “as I go weaving these tales together, I do not stray so far away from Mount Parnassus or from the Muses as many may chance to think.”[88]

Certainly, the stories do offer entertainment for an idle hour. They are clever and humorous and deftly constructed, with a wide array of vivid characters and situations fraught with interest and amusement. Yet they are not just “polite entertainment,” as Auerbach suggested.[89] Indeed, the very fact that they are as delightful to read today as they must have been for Boccaccio's contemporaries suggests that they possess a more universal value. The stories grapple with life in the same way the characters themselves do. The characters can use their intelligence and their command of language to confront and sometimes conquer the vagaries of fortune. The author uses his intelligence and command of language to confront and give shape to the vagaries of human experience. The stories illustrate the power of words to order, to expand, and even to remake our perception of reality.

And yet there are acknowledged limits. Just as the characters cannot control fortune—they can only shape their responses to it—so, too, literature can only go so far in remaking nature; it cannot turn women into goslings or deny the natural urgings of desire. It cannot eliminate avarice or deception from human life. And it cannot serve as a replacement for divine providence. The transformative role of literature is thus a subtle one. It does not effect a sudden conversion like that of Augustine. Nor does it construct a philosophical structure for understanding reality like that of Boethius. As Boccaccio reminds his readers, these stories “were not told in a church” or “the schools of philosophy,” but “in gardens, places designed for pleasure.”[90] But they still, he insists, have a moral and social function. He promised his readers at the outset both pleasure and utility. The goal of the stories is to teach the reader to see, to understand, to appreciate, and to enjoy, thereby instilling both wisdom and shared values in those readers who are receptive to such lessons. As Chaucer scholar Donald Howard put it, when writing on the influence of Boccaccio on Chaucer, “the ethos takes shape not in the tales but in us as we read them.”[91]

Auerbach claims that, despite his artistic skill, Boccaccio's worldliness is too weak a basis “on which the world could be ordered, interpreted, and represented as a reality and as a whole.”[92] Thus, he sees the *Decameron* not as a replacement for Dante's lost synthesis but only as a makeshift consolation. Auerbach wants a unified and coherent moral, artistic, and social vision to fill the void left at the end

of the Middle Ages. But Boccaccio thinks that perhaps we have had enough transcendence for a while. He offers instead a declaration of independence for secular literature—from the church, from the philosophers, from the myths and heroic legends of the Muse-inspired poets, and even from simplistic moralizing. In the *Decameron*, wisdom is to be found in close attention and narrative fidelity to daily life, tempered with warmth and wry affection for a fallible and fragile humanity. As such, the *Decameron* is the true predecessor to Chaucer.

# Chapter 10

# CHAUCER ON THE ROAD TO CANTERBURY

*'Tis sufficient to say, according to the proverb, that here is God's plenty.*

—John Dryden[1]

Geoffrey Chaucer lived in interesting times. His life stretched from circa 1343 to 1400. The Hundred Years' War with France burned and smoldered intermittently. The Black Death ravaged England and the rest of Europe. A series of inconclusive Crusades culminated in the slaughter of Christian knights by Ottoman Turks at Nicopolis. The Western Schism saw rival popes in Avignon and Rome. The Catholic Church was losing its influence. The Peasants' Revolt rocked London and the social order. Feudalism was collapsing. And Richard II, the rightful king of England, was imprisoned and later murdered by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, who usurped the crown as Henry IV.

Chaucer was fully engaged in this chaotic world. He evaded the plague as a child, and he fought for England against France as a young man. He faithfully served three kings in ever more responsible positions, from valet to customs collector to master of the king's works. He traveled throughout Europe as a diplomat, negotiating loans, treaties, and royal marriages. He was rewarded for his service with numerous annuities, grants, and posts, as well as the allowance of a gallon of wine per day. He was, at the same time, England's

greatest poet before Shakespeare, and he created the five-stress line that became a staple of English poetry for centuries. He is often and rightly called the father of English poetry.

Yet Chaucer himself is an enigmatic and ambiguous figure. He managed to stay on good terms with both Richard II and the king's murderer, Henry IV. He grew wealthy and yet borrowed money and was several times sued for debts. He married and fathered at least two and possibly four children, though some scholars speculate that the first two belonged to his patron John of Gaunt. He describes himself as shy and portly but was once fined for beating up a friar and in later life settled a charge of rape. He inserts himself as a character in the *Canterbury Tales*, yet portrays Chaucer the pilgrim with ironic detachment and comic self-effacement, while giving his other characters strong, distinct, and authentic voices.

In a world rent physically, socially, and intellectually, Chaucer focuses his greatest poetry on individuals—their strengths and weaknesses, their loves and hates, their outward personalities and their psychological depths. He all but ignores the great events of his century, offering only the most oblique references to their effects on his fellow pilgrims. In the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer follows Boccaccio in constructing a framing narrative for his individual stories. But whereas all of Boccaccio's storytellers were aristocratic and largely interchangeable, Chaucer's span the social and moral hierarchy, from a worthy knight to a lowly cook; from a voluptuous serial wife to a vain, punctilious prioress; from a pious parson to a coldly loathsome, avaricious seller of pardons and false relics. In Boccaccio, the stories are just an amusing way for the *brigata* to pass the time and, with the possible exception of Dioneo, reveal little or nothing about their tellers. In Chaucer, the pilgrims rather than the tales are of primary interest, and they reveal far more about themselves than they possibly could conceive or, with the exception of the Wife of Bath, likely would wish. The frame is a critical part of the picture. It is life's journey as symbolized by the pilgrimage, and the stories within that frame are not an escape for the leisured few but rather a deeper embrace of humanity, for good and for ill, in all of “Goddes privetee” (God's plenty).[2]

> This world nis but a thurghfare ful of wo,
> And we ben pilgrimes, passinge to and fro.[3]

## LIFE

Chaucer was born in London in 1342 or early 1343. His father, John, like his grandfather, Robert, was an importer and wholesaler of wine. John also served the crown in various capacities, including as deputy butler in the king's household. Chaucer had an older brother, Robert, and a younger sister, Katherine. The family was neither extremely wealthy nor aristocratic, but they were well off and, thanks to Chaucer's mother, Agnes, property-owning gentry as well as established merchants.

The family fortuitously moved to Southampton in 1347, where John was charged with collecting import duties on wine. The Black Death came to London the following year and wiped out more than a third of the population, by some high-end estimates as many as forty thousand of the seventy thousand who had lived there. Parliament was canceled, and many schools were closed. The plague returned periodically, though in less virulent form, and even as late as 1377 the population of London remained under forty thousand.

The countryside was not hit quite as hard, but entire villages were abandoned, and labor shortages and inflation made farming difficult. In 1349, Parliament adopted ordinances to fix wages at preplague levels, but they were largely ineffective. The standard of living rose dramatically for laborers, as did their freedom of movement.

The Chaucers returned to London in 1349, after the plague had run its initial course. John inherited a number of properties from deceased relatives. Robert followed in his father's profession, but John had higher aspirations for his obviously bright second son. Opportunities abounded because of the devastation of the population and the shortage of suitable young men.

Chaucer started school in 1349, in all likelihood at St. Paul's Almonry. He continued his education as a page in the household of Elizabeth, the Countess of Ulster, who later became Duchess of Clarence when she married Lionel, the third son of King Edward III. We know of Chaucer's position because he is listed in her household accounts as receiving a complete set of clothes. We depend on such scattered records for even occasional glimpses of Chaucer throughout his life. Of his private existence, we know only what we can surmise from these bare facts and his rich works. He lived, like Boccaccio, between two worlds—the merchant and the noble—engaged with both, but fully a part of neither.

Chaucer traveled with the duchess's entourage from residence to residence. His duties were menial, but his continuing education was not. He learned fine matters along with French, English, and Latin grammar. He participated in hunting and hawking and other pursuits of the nobility. He came to know John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster

and Edward's second son, who was only a few years Chaucer's senior and would become his lifelong friend and most important patron.

Chaucer was trained as a soldier and sent to France in 1359, at the age of sixteen or seventeen, during one of the intermittent incursions into France that marked the Hundred Years' War. He was captured as part of a foraging party in 1360 and ransomed by the king the following year for sixteen pounds, apparently the standard price for a squire.

His activities in the following six years are unknown. According to one early biographer, he studied law in London, where he was fined two shillings for beating a friar on Fleet Street. The reliability of both aspects of that account is uncertain. It definitely was a violent era, however. His maternal grandfather had been murdered before Chaucer was born. His own father had been kidnapped by an aunt trying to force an advantageous marriage with her daughter and thereby to keep certain property in the family. If she had succeeded, Chaucer would never have been born. Court records indicate that murders, abductions, and rapes were all too frequent (as, of course, they are today).

Chaucer's father died in 1366, when Chaucer was about twenty-four. Around the same time, Chaucer married Philippa de Roet, who was a lady-in-waiting to the queen. Her sister, Katherine Swynford, was the longtime mistress and later the third wife of John of Gaunt. Some scholars speculate, on very thin evidence, that Philippa was also a mistress of John of Gaunt and that her first two children belonged to him rather than to Chaucer. But Gaunt's generous patronage of Chaucer is readily explained by sisterly influence and genuine regard without any need for a soap-opera subplot. Chaucer and Philippa were often apart due to their respective duties, but there is no reason to think they were unhappy, and the cynical view of marriage reflected in several of the *Canterbury Tales* is too insubstantial a basis for any such conclusion.

Chaucer became a valet to the king in 1367 and quickly rose through the ranks of the royal household. He was dispatched on important diplomatic missions to Flanders and Spain and made several trips each to France and Italy. He appears to have been a discreet and highly effective diplomat. He forged a trade pact with Genoa and arranged a seaport for Genoese imports. In Florence, he convinced the House of Bardi to loan substantial sums to Edward III to fund his continental ambitions. This last task was complicated by the fact that, thirty years earlier, Edward III had defaulted on debts to Bardi, causing the bank to founder and Boccaccio's father to lose his position.

Chaucer continued on such missions throughout his life, for

Richard II as well as Edward III, and possibly even Henry IV. He was a very adaptable civil servant and received grants and annuities from the crown throughout his life. He also filled a variety of responsible positions, beginning with comptroller of customs at the Port of London for wool and other items in 1374. In that capacity, he occupied a house at Aldgate, the easternmost point of entry into the city of London. His house was the gate itself, consisting of two towers and a long connecting room over the archway.

Edward III died in 1377, and his grandson, the ten-year-old Richard II, inherited the throne. Richard's father, Edward of Woodstock, known as the Black Prince for his black armor, had died the previous year. John of Gaunt was the unofficial steward of the realm. These were not quiet years, not for the continent, not for England, and not for Chaucer. The Western Schism, with its rival popes, began in 1378. In 1381, the Peasants' Revolt flowed literally under Chaucer's house when a sympathetic alderman opened the gate to the mob marching on London. They had numerous grievances, including a poll tax, wage controls in the aftermath of the Black Death, and other remnants of feudalism.[4] Numerous royal officials were murdered, with particular attention paid to tax collectors. (Chaucer seems wisely to have stayed quietly in his towers.) John of Gaunt's palace was stormed, looted, and burned to the ground. The revolt ended only when the young King Richard courageously rode out to confront the crowd and promised to address their grievances. The rebellion's leader, Wat Tyler, treated Richard II with contempt and was stabbed to death by the king's servants.

In 1380, Chaucer was sued for *raptus* ("rape") by one Cecily Champain. The exact nature of the charge and what it indicated has been the subject of much speculation. Cecily was the stepdaughter of Alice Perrers, the "official mistress" of Edward III and herself an intimate friend of Chaucer. The most reasonable speculation is that Chaucer had an affair with Cecily and got her pregnant. She then sued in order to extract a settlement that would support her and her expected child, possibly the "Lewis Chaucer" to whom Chaucer later dedicated a short treatise on the astrolabe (a nice touch given that Abelard and Heloise named their illegitimate child Astrolabe).

Chaucer lost his customs post and was out of royal favor for a time when John of Gaunt was off fighting in Spain. But he took advantage of his semiretirement to begin work on the *Canterbury Tales*. He also served as justice of the peace for the county of Kent and was later a knight of the shire and a member of Parliament. His wife, Philippa, likely died in 1387. She was in her midforties, and they had been married for twenty-one years.

In 1389, with the return of Gaunt, Chaucer was appointed master of the king's works, a sort of general contractor in charge of repairs and building projects at Westminster, Windsor, and the Tower of London. It was a highly demanding position that very likely kept him from completing the *Canterbury Tales*. He resigned the post in 1391, less because of the burden of the work than the fact that he was robbed three times by armed bandits. Chaucer necessarily carried large amounts of money between locations to pay for labor and materials, and the bandits seemed to have tracked his movements with care.

Even after Richard II was deposed in 1399 by Henry Bolingbroke, Chaucer did not lose the royal favor. The new Henry IV not only confirmed Chaucer's annuity but even doubled it. His daily pitcher of wine—now an annual "tonel," equal to about 252 gallons—was reconfirmed. He thus served three kings but was never accused of corruption, despite many opportunities for enriching himself, which showed either remarkable honesty or a combination of deftness and luck. Biographer Peter Ackroyd speaks of Chaucer's "canny neutrality" in the face of political upheaval.[5] At the very least, Chaucer was a highly adaptable survivor.

John of Gaunt died in 1399. Richard II was murdered in February 1400. Chaucer himself died eight months later, on October 25, 1400. His remains were moved in 1556 to what became Poets' Corner at Westminster Abbey. As the acknowledged father of English poetry, it was only fitting that he was the first to be buried there.

## TROILUS AND CRISEYDE

Edward III was the first king after the Norman Conquest to speak English well. Old English (the Anglo-Saxon language of *Beowulf* and Alfred the Great) had been forgotten, and there was next to no literature in what would become known as Middle English. But the nationalism engendered by the Hundred Years' War led to a new emphasis on a distinctively English language. Use of Anglo-Norman French—though still common in the law courts and the royal court—declined. English became the official language of England twenty years after Chaucer's death.

In the absence of a distinctly English literature, Chaucer's early poetry was modeled on French courtly romances such as the *Roman de la Rose*. But Chaucer was also fluent in Latin and Italian. He read the

Roman poets with care, especially Virgil and Ovid. And, after his travels to Italy, he grew intimately familiar with the works of Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio. He pulled together elements from all three traditions—French, Latin, and Italian—in helping to forge Middle English into a new poetic medium. As noted previously, Chaucer was the first to develop in English the highly flexible five-stress, ten-syllable line, which became the iambic pentameter of Shakespeare and later poets. Although he used many words unfamiliar, if still vaguely intuitable, today, and his word order and spelling were more flexible than our own, his work is readily understandable by modern readers with only modest annotation. A complete translation is unnecessary and destroys the impact of his poetry. Accordingly, I will always quote the original text, though I will add the modern translation in brackets for difficult-to-decipher words or phrases.

Chaucer likely met Boccaccio during his first trip to Florence in 1372, three years before Boccaccio's death. He may also have met Petrarch, though this seems less likely. Regardless, he read and undoubtedly obtained copies of the works of both, along with those of Dante. Boccaccio had the most direct influence on Chaucer. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Chaucer nowhere mentions Boccaccio, whereas he freely mentions Petrarch and Dante, along with the Latin and French poets from whom he learned the most.

Chaucer relied more or less heavily on Boccaccio for several of his *Canterbury Tales*, including the Knight's Tale, which is based on Boccaccio's *Il Teseida*, and the Clerk's Tale, which is essentially a free English translation of a French translation of Petrarch's Latin translation of Boccaccio's *Griselda*. And his *Troilus and Criseyde* draws directly on Boccaccio's *Il Filostrato*, although Chaucer greatly improves on the original through omissions and additions and the imprint of his own poetic genius.[6]

Indeed, many consider *Troilus and Criseyde*, written between 1380 and 1385, to be Chaucer's "masterpiece,"[7] and the "most accomplished English narrative" before Milton's *Paradise Lost*,[8] if not the "greatest narrative poem of love in the English language."[9] It is also called "the first modern work of literature in English"[10] and, with some justification, the first novel because of its tight plot and focus on the interior life of the characters. Yet it is still very much a medieval poem of courtly love, freely mixing epic, tragic, and comic elements into a seamless whole.

The poem likely was read aloud in courtly circles even before it was published. The plot is easily told and would already have been familiar to Chaucer's listeners and readers. Troilus, one of the sons of King Priam of Troy, falls in love with Criseyde, a widowed Trojan woman and also the daughter of the seer Calchas, who, anticipating

Troy's fall, has taken refuge with the besieging Greek forces. Troilus succeeds in his suit, assisted by Criseyde's uncle, Pandarus (from whom we derive the word *pander*). They pledge eternal troth to one another, but, when Criseyde is handed over to the Greeks in a prisoner exchange, she succumbs to the carefully calculated attentions of the Greek warrior Diomede. Troilus, brokenhearted, throws himself recklessly into battle until he is finally killed by Achilles.

Three aspects of the poem are characteristic of Chaucer's unique achievement and, hence, worth highlighting here. First, the narrator of the poem is a distinct personality in his own right whose views and editorial comments regularly intrude upon the narrative. Second, the character of Criseyde and the choices she makes or fails to make are developed and elaborated with great subtlety. Third, the whole story is enveloped in a philosophical and religious meditation on the role of individual free will, fate, chance, and divine providence derived from Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, which Chaucer was translating around the same time he was writing the poem. These three elements —the intrusive, potentially unreliable narrator, the close study of character, and the philosophical overlay—are all hallmarks of many novels.

The narrator claims a fictional author (one “Lollius”) as his source and purports to follow him not only in the *sentence* (the meaning or import) of the story but in the very words, as translated from the Latin.[11] His only job, he insists, is to “ryme wel” in English.[12]

> Disblameth me if any word be lame,
> For as myn auctour seyde, so sey I.[13]

The pretense of translation allows the narrator to distance himself from the text and to apostrophize on it. It adds a new layer of depth to the poem. The narrator can both idealize the romance and yet display his own disillusionment with romance.[14] He offers philosophical asides on the weakness of the human will, the fragility of human happiness, and the forces of chance and fate that batter us without mercy. Yet he makes clear his own deep affection for Criseyde and his personal disappointment at having to report her infidelity. For much of the book, the narrator refuses to see what he already knows: that Criseyde will be unfaithful and unworthy of Troilus's devotion.[15] He resists his own text, weeping as he writes these woeful verses.

> And now my penne, allas, with which I write,
> Quaketh for drede of that I moste endite [must report].[16]

The narrator's gloss adds to the reader's own task of interpretation. He is an additional prism through which characters are seen. Dante the pilgrim is not the same as Dante the author. But the levels of ironic distance imposed between text and reader by Chaucer are something altogether new, even if they do have antecedents in Ovid.

Also new is his complex delineation of character. The narrator as translator gives us all the tools to understand the character of Criseyde without really understanding her himself, which raises the question whether we as readers understand her any better. Troilus is a relatively simple character; to say he wears his heart on his sleeve would understate the case. But Criseyde is something of a cipher—beautiful, elegant, and proper, still too young not to be conscious of her own vitality and unfulfilled longing, but fearful of change and of any damage to her reputation. She already stands in a precarious position with her fellow Trojans due to her father's treachery. Her uncle Pandarus plays on these traits in pressing Troilus's suit. He raises her interest first by revealing that he has a matter of great import but then showing such reluctance to reveal it that she practically begs him to do so. When he finally admits that Troilus is literally dying for love, her first reaction is one of sheer horror, and she reproaches her uncle severely for suggesting she return that love.

But, once the idea of Troilus is introduced, it grows in her consciousness, fanned by her vanity as well as her fears. She listens with care as the public praises his prowess and his courtesy; she notes his good looks and exalted rank; and she is intrigued most of all by his overwhelming love of her. She

> …gan to caste [ponder] and rollen up and down
> Withinne hire thought his excellent prowesse,
> And his estat [rank], and also his renown,
> His wit, his shap [physique], and ek his gentillesse;
> But moost hire favour was, for his distresse
> Was al for hire…[17]

She pities him even as her heart glories in her power of life and death over such a knight.[18]

There is no direct criticism of Criseyde in this account of the gradual growth of her love and the various fancies that fuel it. Compare her to a more modern heroine, such as Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, whose feelings for Mr. Darcy had already begun to shift when she rides up the drive to his massive estate and realizes "that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!"[19] Criseyde, like Elizabeth, opens herself to Troilus for a myriad of valid reasons—

his honorable behavior, gentility, courage, and importance to the community, as well as his renown and handsome physique—that do credit both to her sense and to her sensibility. By contrast, Troilus's uncritical, uninformed love for Criseyde appears to be based only on intense physical attraction.

But Pandarus is still critical to the union. Troilus is hapless as a lover—reserved, discreet to a fault, and overawed to the point of prostration. Yet these are the very qualities that make Criseyde feel safe in entrusting herself to him. She is ready of her own accord and even chides her uncle for being too explicit. "As helpe me God, ye shenden every deel [So help me God, you are spoiling everything]!" she tells him.[20] The "courtship" and, even more, the machinations through which Pandarus finally manipulates them both into bed are highly comic, even as the climax is beautifully moving and evocative. When Troilus tells Criseyde that the time has come for her to yield herself to him, she responds, "Ne hadde I er now, my swete herte deere, / Ben yolde, ywis, I were now nought heere [If I had not yielded to you already, I would not be here now]!"[21] The reader, along with the narrator and, of course, Troilus himself, cannot help but love Criseyde, and her passionate union with Troilus brings them both "as muche joie as herte may comprende [contain]."[22]

"But al to litel," the narrator tells us, "lasteth swich joie, ythonked be Fortune."[23] For Criseyde repeats (and therefore casts a new, disillusioning light on) the process when she is brought by Diomede to the Greek camp. Diomede and Troilus, though both great warriors, are opposites as lovers. Where Troilus is earnest and shy, Diomede is cunning and bold. With no Pandarus to help him, he must manipulate Criseyde himself, which is easier because his heart is not truly engaged. He has nothing to lose but his words:

> With al the sleghte [cunning] and al that evere he kan,
> How he may best, with shortest taryinge,
> Into his net Criseydes herte brynge.
> To this entent he koude nevere fyne [cease];
> To fisshen hire he leyde out hook and lyne.[24]

Criseyde is too frightened to try to escape back to Troy, which she knows is doomed in any event. She is too isolated and weak in resolve to reject the friendship and protection of Diomede. And she is clearly attracted by his more vigorous and masculine wooing, though she recognizes that Diomede is neither as noble nor as worthy as Troilus. Criseyde laments her betrayal even as she gives her heart to Diomede, consoling herself with the self-deluding thought: "To Diomede algate [at least] I wol be trewe."[25]

Criseyde blames circumstance for the erosion of her will and the breaking of her troth. And the narrator abets her evasion of responsibility with repeated platitudes about the instability of all earthly attachments. The narrator, who does not wish "this sely [hapless] womman chyde / Forther than the storye wol devyse,"[26] attributes the loss of their love to fortune, which, like a wheel, raises us up only to cast us down.[27] He goes further and adopts the view of Boethius that what we see as chance or fortune is part of God's necessity, which orders all things. The soul of Troilus, upon his death, is carried up to the highest sphere of heaven, in a Dantean apotheosis. There, in perfect happiness, he gazes down with indifference at the wretched little world where all is vanity and blind desire. The narrator concludes with an injunction to "al oure herte on heven caste,"[28] for He who died on the cross for us never will be false.

This Christian ending to what is throughout a secular, pre-Christian tale of love won and lost has a jarring, tacked-on quality. Indeed, it seems to repudiate the poem itself, for why combine humor, pathos, and tragedy in such a compelling way only to dismiss the drama of human romance as wretched and vain? The poem, we feel, might better have stopped at line 1806 of book 5: "Despitously hym slough the fierse Achille [Fierce Achilles slew him without pity]."[29] But it does not end there, and for good reason.

The narrator, in keeping with his own desire to paint Criseyde's betrayal in a softer light, concludes that Troilus wrongly placed his faith in transient worldly joy. But the reader does not have to accept that assessment, at least not fully. As one scholar remarks, the middle book, in which the love of Troilus and Criseyde is consummated, is "Chaucer's best effort at the dramatization of sexually manifested joy between two beings on this mutable earth."[30] It is, for the couple, the highest Good, the culmination of all longing touted by Boethius. Perhaps earthly joy is a small thing in comparison to the bliss of heaven, but it is not a small thing at all in its own terms for those who live upon the earth. It is the greatest happiness that two people—constrained by circumstance and their own frailty—can know. The moral and aesthetic beauty of their love, and the tragedy of its failure, are presumably what compelled Chaucer to write the poem of Troilus and Criseyde in the first place.

Chaucer was fascinated with Boethius's meditation upon the interplay of free will, fortune, and providence. Chaucer was also, like Boethius, a devout Christian. But Chaucer was a poet, not a philosopher or a cleric. For Chaucer, worldly joy is still a thing of intrinsic value, and the two lovers know it in its most exquisite form. They know not just the conventions of courtly love but "as muche joie as herte may comprende." Such joy is necessarily transient—through

the vagaries of fortune and the inherent instability of human attachments. Such joy is necessarily incomplete—compared with our ultimate union in God. But earthly passion is not to be denigrated on that account. The poem, as a whole, celebrates worldly joy even as it mourns its inevitable passing and searches for a broader context that provides meaning to the tragedy. The moral and philosophical nostrums with which the narrator glosses his text are not untrue, but they cannot erase the felt experience and deeper understanding of human life presented in the poem.

## "WHAT MAN ARTOW?"

*Troilus and Criseyde* is a finished and polished poem. It is whole and complete. The *Canterbury Tales*, sadly, is unfinished. Chaucer worked on it from 1386 until his death in 1400. Not only were some tales and connecting prologues left unwritten, but even the order of those that were in most respects complete is uncertain. Later editors have had to reconstruct, as best they could, Chaucer's likely intent.

Yet the *Canterbury Tales* is still, by common consensus, the greater work.[31] It is more diverse. It is more ambitious. It is more subversive of literary, social, and moral conventions. And it is more original in its portrayal of the elusive and ever-changing elements that make up personal identity, both internally and as projected to the world. It is also more fun. Had Chaucer written nothing else, the Miller's Tale and the Wife of Bath's Prologue alone would have secured his immortality.

The month is April, beautifully invoked by Chaucer in the first eighteen lines of the General Prologue, lines whose memorization was once a rite of passage for high-school sophomores. Twenty-nine pilgrims—some alone, others in small groups—gather by chance at the Tabard Inn in London, each intending to visit the shrine of Thomas Becket, who was martyred at Canterbury Cathedral in 1170. They resolve to travel together, and the genial innkeeper, Harry Bailly, offers to accompany them. To pass the time, he proposes that they tell one another stories. He initially suggests that each pilgrim tell two stories on the way to Canterbury and two on the return journey; in the end, though, they tell only one each, and several, including the Host, tell none at all. But the prize announced by Harry Bailly remains the same:

And which of yow that bereth [conducts] him best of alle,

That is to seyn, that telleth in this cas
Tales of best sentence [meaning or matter] and most solas
[delight],
Shal have a soper at oure aller cost.[32]

We have, then, our criteria for judging the tales: *sentence* and *solas*. They should combine wisdom or instruction and delight. Harry Bailly is to be the judge, but he proves an unreliable one since he misconstrues the *sentence* of almost every story told.

Chaucer himself, presumably a better judge, is also among their number. But he is a self-effacing character who blends into the background so readily that a half-dozen tales are told before the Host even notices his existence:

And than at erst [for the first time] he loked upon me
And seyde thus: "What man artow [art though]?" quod he.
"Thou lokest as thou woldest finde an hare,
For ever upon the ground I see thee stare."[33]

Bailly describes Chaucer (that is to say, Chaucer the poet has Bailly describe Chaucer the pilgrim) as portly, with an elvish countenance, and aloof from the rest of the company. Bailly has no high opinion of Chaucer as a storyteller either. Chaucer's Tale of Sir Thopas, a parody of medieval tail-rhyme romances—in which a rhyming couplet is followed by a shorter line that does not rhyme—is interrupted by the Host, who exclaims, "Thy drasty ryming is nat worth a tord [turd]."[34]

Chaucer, the bemused and introverted pilgrim, has none of the angst of his Dantean predecessor. And, although his journey from London to Canterbury may be religious in import, it is also a holiday excursion amidst the budding flowers of spring. Members of the aristocracy, who would hardly be comporting with the remainder of the group or traveling from a humble inn, are necessarily absent. But, otherwise, the pilgrims are a cross section of secular and ecclesiastical England. Chaucer undertakes to describe each member of the group in the General Prologue and then to report their stories and their conversation faithfully. In doing so, he offers us a tapestry of the rapidly changing nation.

Chaucer the poet, with his broad experience and protean adaptability, was singularly well positioned to write what was known in the fourteenth century as "estates satire," highlighting and exaggerating the characteristic traits of various members of the three estates: the nobility, the clergy, and the commoners. But Chaucer the

pilgrim presents himself as comically naive in his own assessments, creating an ironic gap between text and *sentence* that persists throughout the *Canterbury Tales*. His portraits examine "estaat" [status], "array" [clothing], and "condicioun" [character].[35] He seeks, using the categories of his time, to answer for each pilgrim the question put to him by Harry Bailly: "What man artow?" But the answers prove surprisingly elusive to the reader and to Chaucer.

Take, for example, Chaucer's description of "a Nonne, a Prioresse" and thus, one would expect, a deeply pious and likely severe person. Yet the first thing Chaucer remarks upon is that "hir smyling was ful simple and coy"[36] and that she used colorful oaths. Chaucer professes himself innocently enamored of her, but his actual descriptions provide a somewhat different picture: she sings divine service "ful semely" through her nose; she speaks elegant French, but of a bastard variety unknown in Paris; she is a fastidious eater who counterfeits the manners of court; her compassion is attested by the fact that she would weep for a dead mouse, her charity in feeding her small lap dogs roasted meats and white bread; she wears a pleated headdress and an elegant cloak over her ample bulk ("For hardily she was nat undergrowe"), fastened with a gold brooch emblazoned with the tagline from one of Virgil's pastoral *Eclogues*: *Amor vincit omnia* ("Love conquers all").[37] The accumulation of such small details is wonderful, but none of them of course has anything to do with what a prioress *ought* to be.[38] Chaucer the pilgrim purports to accept her on her own valuation. Yet there is a wide gap between that narrative approval and the biting satire experienced by the reader.[39]

Estates satire generally proceeded through exaggeration and condemnation. But, as one scholar explains, "Chaucer is the master of irony by way of the superlative."[40] Chaucer admires the manly prowess, expensive clothes, and stable of fine horses of the Monk; the generosity of the "merye" Friar—"the beste beggere in his hous"[41]—in giving dowries to the young women he seduces; and the fine clothes and imposing manner of the Merchant, disguising the fact that he is deeply in debt. Only four figures are given truly flattering portraits, without the corrosive effects of irony, in the General Prologue. They are the ideal types of their estates: the "ful worthy" Knight, who "loved chivalrye, / Trouthe and honour, freedom and curteisye";[42] the humble Parson, who ministers to his flock and distributes his tithes among the poor of his parish; the Ploughman, "livinge in pees and parfit charitee";[43] and, if we may add a fourth estate devoted to learning, the Scholar from Oxford, who rides a skinny nag, wears a threadbare cloak, and prefers books of philosophy to any worldly advantage.

Chaucer does not stop at types; he gives us richly realized

individuals. Yet the pilgrims are not realistic in the Dantean sense, with overpowering traits that lend cohesion to their actions and expose their deeper selves. Like the Prioress, they are vivid and lifelike and colorfully drawn.[44] Yet, as the scholar Peter Brown suggests, they also share all the inconsistencies and vagaries of real people.[45] We assemble their characters, as we do in real life, through bits and pieces of information—the descriptions in the General Prologue, the stories they tell, their interactions with one another—that don't necessarily add up to a simple picture, fixed from every perspective. The pilgrims themselves, including Chaucer, see their fellows (and understand their stories) from their own very different perspectives. And this strategy is in keeping with the overall *sentence* of the *Canterbury Tales*, in which the nature of reality depends very much on the moral, social, political, and aesthetic presuppositions of teller and listener alike. To complicate matters further, the reality portrayed in each tale is responded to and reinterpreted in turn by other tellers. This is, after all, a competition as well as a collective undertaking, and we as readers must make our own judgments as to *sentence* and *solas*.

## THE KNIGHT'S TALE

The Host chooses the first storyteller by lot, and the lot falls to the Knight, though whether by “aventure [chance], or sort [fate], or cas [fortune],” Chaucer cannot say.[46] And that is perfectly fitting, for the Knight's Tale, in addition to being a traditional chivalric romance, is an extended Boethian meditation on the role of chance, fate, and fortune in human affairs. Shakespeare drew from it for his *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Two knights, Arcite and Palamon, royal-born cousins and sworn brothers in arms from Thebes, fall in love with the same girl. Her name is Emily, and she is the younger sister of Theseus's wife, Hippolyta, queen of the Amazons. Arcite and Palamon, having been defeated in battle by Theseus, are languishing in a prison in Athens. From the barred window of their cell, Palamon sees Emily, “fressher than the May,”[47] gathering flowers and singing like an angel from heaven. Palamon cries out as if he were struck unto the heart. Arcite, who replaces him at the window, “is hurt as muche as he.”[48] The two, now rivals in love, quarrel bitterly over precedence, which is slightly absurd since neither has a hope of wooing the maiden from his prison cell.

Arcite, though, is eventually released on the plea of a visiting

friend of Theseus. He is banished from Athens on pain of death should he return. Arcite is thus free but separated from Emily. Palamon is still imprisoned but can at least gaze upon his love. “Yow loveres axe I now this questioun,” says the Knight: “Who hath the worse, Arcite or Palamoun?”[49] In fact, they are both miserable and riven with jealousy at the possibility that the other might find advantage in his circumstance.

In the event, Arcite cannot stay away. He returns to Athens, rendered largely unrecognizable by the wasting effects of love. There he takes a lowly position in the house of Theseus and gradually wins favor and advancement and plots to win Emily for his own. Meanwhile, Palamon, driven near madness by imprisonment, effects his own escape. Arcite and Palamon meet by chance in a forest outside Athens (the very forest which will play a critical role in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*) where Palamon has come to hide and Arcite to gather May flowers. They confront one another, but Palamon is unarmed and starving. So, in chivalrous fashion, Arcite brings him food, armor, a sword, and bedding, and the next morning the two set upon one another with the ferocity of wild animals.

They are aptly matched, and neither can gain an advantage. Theseus, out hunting with Hippolyta and Emily, comes upon the battling ex-prisoners, separates them, and, learning their true identities, is inclined to execute them on the spot. Hippolyta and Emily both plead for mercy to the two lovers, and Theseus acquiesces. He schedules a grand tournament for a year from that day to which each man is to bring one hundred knights. They will fight until either Palamon or Arcite is killed or taken prisoner. The other will win the hand of Emily.

Theseus builds a lavish, enclosed stadium, with a temple to Venus at one end and a temple to Mars at the other. Palamon worships at the shrine of Venus, goddess of love, and prays for success. Arcite does the same at the shrine of Mars, the god of war. Each receives a favorable, if ambiguous, sign. The two gods dispute the outcome in heaven, and a compromise is proposed by Saturn. Meanwhile, Emily, who is a virgin and wishes to remain so, offers her own prayers to Diana, chaste goddess of the hunt. But her suit is rejected; she will have to marry either Palamon or Arcite.

There is nothing to choose between the two; they are equal in love, equal in war, and equal in virtue. Emily does not want either as her husband. Yet someone must prevail, and Saturn arranges for it to be Arcite, when Palamon, bleeding heavily, is taken prisoner. Emily immediately smiles upon Arcite, for “wommen, as to speken in comune, / They folwen alle the favour of fortune [It is generally said

that women follow the favor of fortune].”[50] Yet Arcite's victory is short-lived. His horse shies from a specter sent by Pluto, and his chest is crushed against the saddle horn. He dies shortly thereafter. After years of mourning, Emily finally, at the behest of Theseus, marries the faithful Palamon, and they live in great happiness.

Most scholars agree that the Knight's Tale was written as a stand-alone work and only later was included in the *Canterbury Tales* and assigned by Chaucer to the Knight. But the Knight's position as teller still adds its own resonance to the tale and affects our reading of it. The story, in context, is a wistful farewell to the ancient pagan world with its many battling gods and to the medieval world of courtly romance. Both the pagan and the chivalric elements are excellent fodder for poetry, and they are presented with all the pageantry of nostalgia (and the irony of distance). But they are as strictly circumscribed by the poem as they are by the stadium in which the combat occurs.[51] The gentle, aging Knight is something of a Don Quixote, in his stained tunic made of rough cloth. He has lived the age of chivalry, but his dandified son is a Squire of a very different ilk. The Knight is also a pious Christian—more so than many of the ecclesiastics on the trip—and so he regards the pagan gods with disdain.

Thus, Palamon from his cell reproaches the “cruel goddes, that governe / This world with binding of youre word eterne.”[52] Why does Arcite triumph over Palamon, only to die a freakish and ghastly death? There is no conceivable explanation to be found in the character or actions of either man. At the end of the poem, Theseus delivers a Boethian speech on the mutability of all worldly things and the pointlessness of railing against what is ordained for us all. The essence of wisdom, he says, is “to maken vertu of necessitee,”[53] to seize joy where we can, and to recognize that there is a divine order contrived by majestic Jupiter that we can neither change nor understand.

There is no Christian element in this thoroughly pagan meditation on fortune and providence. Recall that there was none in Boethius either. Yet Boethius, like the Knight, was a devout Christian. So, even though the Knight's Tale implies, and he plainly believes, that we live in a better world under the banner of Christ and without the irrational pagan gods, we are left with the question whether we really understand the unpredictable ways of divine providence any better. And the answer is plainly no. In retrospect, we seek reasons why one character ended up happy and the other ended up dead, just as Emily immediately smiled on the one whom fortune seemed to favor. But there is no discernable pattern based on justice or just deserts. We cannot fathom the ways of God. Thus, pagan and Christian alike, we

are left to ask with Palamon:

> What governaunce is in this prescience
> That giltelees tormenteth innocence?[54]

## THE MILLER, THE REEVE, AND THE COOK

The pilgrims applaud the Knight's "noble storie,"[55] and the Host, proceeding in order of rank, asks the Monk to tell the next one. But the Miller, who has been drinking and can barely stay on his horse, interrupts. He is described in the General Prologue as big-boned, red-faced, broad-featured, and so brawny he could break down any door with his head. He is full of chatter and vulgar jests, and not above stealing a portion of the corn he grinds. Now, deep in his cups, the Miller will not forbear quietly for any man and refuses to recognize either social hierarchy or courtesy. He is, in short, a "cherl" [churl], the polar opposite of the "ful worthy" Knight, but nothing will stop him from telling his "cherle's tale."[56] Chaucer spends seventeen lines regretting that he must report the story verbatim, urging those who seek *gentillesse*, *moralitee*, and *holinesse* to "turne over the leef, and chese another tale," and pleading that those who do read it "blameth nat me."[57] The buildup, of course, is intentionally irresistible, and what follows is the most remarkable and memorable of the Canterbury tales; indeed, it may still stand as the most shockingly entertaining tale ever told. As Chaucer biographer Derek Pearsall puts it, "To see such a poem, familiar as it has become, anew in the context of late-fourteenth-century English literary culture is to recognize a miracle."[58]

The Miller wants to "quyte" [match or pay back] the Knight with a tale of his own.[59] He, too, presents a love triangle. Two men vie for the favor of the same woman. But nothing could be further from the noble courtesies, courtly conventions, and philosophical musings of the Knight's Tale. One of the would-be lovers, a parish clerk named Absolon, apes the manners of a courtly lover: he parts his long, curly hair in the middle, wears tightly fitting, brightly colored clothes, and plays and sings upon the guitar. But he is a fool and is mocked for his pretentions. The other, an Oxford scholar named Nicholas, is a sly, bold young man experienced in love affairs. The object of their affections, moreover, is no chaste Emily. Alison is a lithe and lively eighteen-year-old, regrettably married to a rich old carpenter. Absolon woos her from afar, singing below her window at night, sending her

presents, and calling himself her slave. But Nicholas is on the spot, since he rents a room from the carpenter. When Alison's husband is off in another town, he skips the preliminary and seizes, so to speak, the opportunity:

> As clerkes ben ful subtile and ful queynte [sly].
> And prively he caughte hire by the queynte [cunt].[60]

Alison, invoking courtly conventions, tells him, “Do wey your handes,” which are now clamped on her behind, “for your curteisye!”[61] But Nicholas speaks so fair to her and pleads his case so earnestly that she quickly swears by Saint Thomas Becket to be his lover as long as he can ensure that her jealous husband will be out of the way. Nicholas has no doubt on that score:

> “Nay, therof care thee noght,” quod Nicholas.
> “A clerk had litherly biset his whyle [a scholar has wasted
> his time],
> But if he coude a carpenter bigyle.”[62]

Just how Nicholas doth “bigyle” the carpenter and enjoy his Alison; just how Absolon, too, is tricked but, armed with a red-hot piece of plowshare, exacts a measure of revenge—all this can only be read with the greatest enjoyment, and the pilgrims themselves receive the tale with gales of laughter.

Only the Reeve, “a sclendre colerik man,”[63] takes offense. He is an estate manager but a carpenter by trade, and believes that the tale was directed at him. He wants to quit the Miller in turn, so he tells a story comparable in matter to the Miller's Tale but very different in *sentence*, and one that does not engender the same *solas*.

The Reeve's Tale replaces the credulous carpenter with a miller who regularly cheats his customers. He replaces the Oxford scholar who beds the carpenter's wife with two scholars from Cambridge who bed the miller's wife and daughter, in a plot device drawn from Boccaccio. The two stories reflect the different personalities of the pilgrims who tell them. The Miller is vigorous and full of life. His may be a “cherle's tale,” but it shows an excess of high spirits and earthly exuberance, like Alison herself. The Reeve is old and bitter. In his tale, sex is an instrument of revenge, not a product of lust. The wife and daughter are given little or no character development, and, although they may enjoy themselves in the end, the sex, in the beginning, is in each instance close to rape. The two clerks’ overriding motivation is to obtain the redress that they consider their just compensation under

the law. The amoral but delightful tale of the Miller becomes in the Reeve's telling an uncomfortable sermon on just deserts.

The tone falls even further in the Cook's Tale that follows. A dismissed, dissipated, thieving apprentice moves in with a fellow scoundrel:

> That lovede dys and revel and disport,
> And hadde a wyf that heeld for countenance [appearance's sake]
> A shoppe, and swyved [whored] for hir sustenance.64

Despite this promising beginning for a comedy of the urban underworld, the "tale" ends abruptly with those lines. Chaucer never finished it, but the sixty extant lines sufficiently gesture further in the direction established by the two prior tales.

The Knight's vision and values have been held up to ridicule. The idealism, the hierarchy, the ceremony, and the sense of *noblesse oblige* embodied in his story are thoroughly undermined by the obscene and, frankly, far more amusing stories that follow. Chaucer is deliberately breaking down the boundaries between literary forms with a dramatic but steady descent in tone and matter. Romance becomes farce becomes something altogether meaner and grittier. It is, as one critic put it, "a downward movement from the high-minded to the scurrilous."65

Yet all four tales (if we can include the Cook's fragment) were plainly intended to coexist as a unit. The cherle's tale has as valid a claim to be heard as the courtly romance. Literature can embrace both extremes and everything in between. The opening unit of the *Canterbury Tales* seems to announce that it will be less about life than about how literature portrays life. Reality is remade by each of the tellers in turn and bears the stamp of their personalities and concerns.

## THE WIFE OF BATH

Marriage plays a significant role in more than half of the *Canterbury Tales* and is the specific focus of at least five. These five tales are commonly known as the "marriage group," though Chaucer does not present them together, as he did the first four tales, and their placement in the overall work is not entirely clear. Two of the tales are offered by their tellers as negative accounts of marriage and two as largely positive. But, in fact, the relations between the various

couples are more complex than that, and the critical issue—In what does a good marriage consist?—is addressed most directly by the Wife of Bath, though she undertakes to "speke of wo that is in mariage."[66]

The Wife of Bath is Chaucer's most memorable character and perhaps the greatest comic creation before Shakespeare's Falstaff. She enthusiastically embraces all the standard classical and medieval misogynist tropes and turns them into instruments of her own power and personal assertion of self. Her prologue is several times the length of her tale, and in it she pours a torrent of words like bathwater over the heads of her listeners.

The Wife claims the right to speak based on experience rather than "auctoritee,"[67] which is a singularly male preserve. She has wed five times since the age of twelve. Just as scholars benefit from multiple teachers and workmen from diverse jobs, so too does the Wife: "Of fyve husbondes scoleiyng [schooling] am I."[68] And, indeed, she will welcome a sixth as soon as he comes along, which she is confident will be very soon.

The Wife invokes a number of scriptural passages to establish that having multiple husbands is no sin. We can't all be virgin saints, she insists, and "that am nat I. / I wol bistowe the flour of al myn age / In the actes and in fruit of mariage."[69] After all, God told us to increase and multiply, and he gave us bodily instruments that are not just for procreation but also for pleasure.

Her first three husbands were all good men in that they were rich and old; although they could barely keep up the marriage contract, she made them labor through the nights, or, if they were themselves feeling lustful, she would exact some ransom before giving in, "for al is for to selle," and she had no particular fondness for old "bacon."[70] Yet she ruled them so well that "ech of hem ful blisful was" and eager to turn their land and wealth into her keeping.[71] Her advice to wives is to use all the tricks given by God to women—lying, weeping, and spinning yarns, among them. She would forestall any criticism by scolding each husband first, especially when she was in the wrong, and would keep them constantly off balance with alternating reproaches and displays of affection. She would accuse one of wenching when he was so sick he could barely stand, and he was delighted at such a sign of her jealous regard. And when she walked out at night, she would claim it was to spy out his mistresses; under that pretense, she pursued her own fun. A clever wife, she insists, can make her husband believe anything, however implausible.

Her fourth husband was a rake and kept his own mistress. She quit him back in kind and let him fry in his own grease of anger and jealousy. And when he died, she had already spied out her next husband, Jankin. He was the worst of the lot and often beat her

soundly. But she married him for love, not money, for he was a handsome man, lively in bed and sparing of his own affection, which only made him the more desirable.

> Wayte what thing we may nat lightly have,
> Thereafter wol we crye al day and crave.
> Forbede us thing, and that desyren we;
> Prees on us faste, and thanne wol we flee.[72]

Jankin was a scholar from Oxford. The Wife was forty and he was about twenty when they married, and she turned over to him all the money and property that had been given to her by her former husbands. Jankin had a massive book full of learned diatribes against wicked wives that he would read constantly and recite to her. They were all written by men, of course, as the Wife notes, for scholars always speak evil of women, unless they are saints: the Virgin Mother or Eve, there is nothing in between. Yet if women had written the stories, they would show far more wickedness among men than the whole lineage of Adam could erase.

Tired of his misogynist preaching, one evening the Wife ripped three pages from Jankin's book even as he read from it, struck him on the cheek with her fist, and knocked him back into the fire. Up he jumped and hit her on the side of the head so hard she lay on the floor as if dead. She was ever after deaf in that ear, but the frightened Jankin—who really did love his wife—was thoroughly subdued. He gave her back governance of the house and land as well as of his tongue and fist, and she made him burn his accursed book. Yet, once Jankin ceded to her "by maistrie, al the soveraynetee" over her honor and his own,[73] they were kind and true to one another, until his untimely death.

The Wife of Bath has taken what she has learned from men about power and has used that to neutralize the advantages they enjoy as a result of law, convention, and physical strength. She adopts the wiles condemned by writers from the time of Ovid and employs them in the service of life and affirmation. Like Boccaccio's Madonna Filippa, she admits to all that men fear and suspect in their wives but openly defies the court of public opinion. She becomes a misogynist's nightmare in order to conquer misogyny and live "ful blisful" with her Jankin. The burning of the book gets them beyond the conventions that otherwise define them. She will drop her Ovidian arts once her husband forswears his antifeminist authorities.[74] Only then, when neither strives for "maistrie," can they set aside the struggle for power and find "parfit joye."[75] The Wife of Bath's Tale is to the same effect; true marital harmony is possible but requires mutual surrender and

trust. Men must give way in their attempts to rule over their wives. Otherwise, all indeed will be woe, and they will be paid back double; for men, as she so ably demonstrates, are no match for women.

## THE REST OF THE MARRIAGE GROUP

The Wife of Bath provokes strong reactions from the other pilgrims. And the other four marriage tales can be seen, in one way or another, as responses to her. Even the mild Scholar from Oxford—perhaps stung by the story of Jankin and by her disparagement of male scholars generally—seeks to quit the Wife in his own quiet, indirect way. He tells the story of Griselda from Boccaccio by way of Petrarch, in order to demonstrate the proper way for a good wife to behave. Yet he inadvertently reinforces rather than refutes the Wife of Bath. Even more thoroughly than Boccaccio's, Chaucer's version of the Griselda story undermines the *sentence* or ostensible moral of the story. Griselda is an obedient, loving wife. But her brute of a husband so grossly abuses the power afforded him by tradition and position that the entire male ideology of marriage is called into question, just as it was by the Wife of Bath.[76] Is a life slavishly devoted to such a man truly admirable? Would not an equal partnership prove more desirable—a partnership in which neither has mastery over the other? Those are the questions the Wife of Bath sought to answer by turning conventional views of marriage and women inside out. The Scholar's Tale proves a lame riposte, though it leads the Merchant to lament that his wife is no Griselda.

The Merchant has been married only two months, but he declares that his “wyf [is] the worste that may be” and would “overmacche” the devil himself.[77] “We wedded men live in sorwe [sorrow] and care,” he insists,[78] and undertakes in his tale to explain why. Yet, in fact, all he illustrates is the self-delusion of January, a prosperous knight in winter, who decides to marry. He chooses a young girl named May, who is as beautiful and fresh as spring itself. January imagines great bliss for himself and is “al coltish” when he takes his new bride to bed, even as “the slakke skin aboute his nekke shaketh” above his nightshirt.[79] May, who clearly either had no choice in the marriage or acquiesced for rank and wealth, “preyseth [values] nat his pleying [lovemaking] worth a bene.”[80] After four days of this, she resolves to take a lover and then brazenly outfaces her willfully (and, for a short time, literally) blind husband. The reader is not particularly sympathetic to May, who revels in her newfound *gentillesse* without

honoring truth or fidelity; nor to January, who ignores the inappropriateness of the marriage. The discrepancy between January and May—in age, rank, wealth, and beauty—is simply too great. In their commercial transaction, they each get pretty much what they deserve.

In the Shipman's Tale, loosely based on the first two stories of Day 8 of the *Decameron*, the mercenary nature of the transaction is even more acute. The wife of a wealthy merchant complains to her husband's supposedly close friend, a monk, that her husband is bad in bed and too cheap to give her adequate money for clothes. The lecherous monk and false friend offers to solve both problems at once and, after a remarkably frank negotiation, they settle on terms. But the monk secretly borrows the money in question from the merchant himself, and then, after giving it to the wife and enjoying her favors, tells the merchant that he repaid the money to his wife. The wife is fully equal to the occasion. When her husband asks for the money, she says she already has spent it on dresses. Don't worry, she tells him: my body is your pledge, and I will work off the debt in bed. At least Alison and May took lovers out of honest lust; the merchant's wife is motivated by the vanity of pretty dresses. Yet all three wives make cuckolds of their husbands without suffering any reprisal.

The final tale of the group—a celebration of *gentillesse* and *patience* by the socially insecure Franklin, who displays neither in his own life—ostensibly involves a marriage of equality and mutual respect. Yet, in the husband's absence, the wife puts off a would-be lover with a condition she believes he can never fulfill. Her rash promise nonetheless comes due, and her husband, to whom she has confessed all, insists that she honor her word, as if she were a delivery of promised goods. His only concern is that no one else discover his own dishonor at being cuckolded. Both are saved by the noble forbearance of the lover, yet it is hard to believe that she will view her husband in the same light afterward.

The net effect of this marriage group is thus mixed. Some see the Franklin's Tale as presenting Chaucer's ideal of an equal marriage, in which neither partner strives for “maistrie” over the other. But that is essentially the message of the Wife of Bath, delivered much more forcefully. The Wife of Bath presents us with a surprisingly modern conception of relationships and the autonomy of women. Yet her own, unique personality overwrites the *sentence* of the story. What we remember most from the Wife of Bath's prologue is the sheer earthly vitality of the woman herself. Even as she approaches old age, deprived of beauty and vigor, she revels in her life and resolves to sell the husks though the flower is gone:

But, Lord Crist! whan that it remembreth me
Upon my yowthe, and on my jolitee,
It tikleth me aboute myn herte rote [to the core of my heart].
Unto this day it dooth myn herte bote [good]
That I have had my world as in my tyme.[81]

## RELIGION AND RETRACTION

For the most part, clerics are handled roughly in the *Canterbury Tales* or, at least, as we saw in the case of the Prioress, with an ample dose of irony. Five of the six clerical portraits in the General Prologue are either explicitly or implicitly negative.

Cynicism about the clergy does not, of course, necessarily translate into cynicism about religion. As the most important institution in everyday life, the church was ripe for satire. And the fact that a number of the clerics in the *Canterbury Tales* are parasites on the genuine, if often naive, religion of the people does not necessarily call religion itself into question. It does, however, raise the question what true and proper faith consists in, just as other tales raise similar questions about marriage and *gentillesse*.

Three stories show the worst side of religious hypocrisy. The Friar and the Summoner quit one another in successive tales, rather as the Reeve endeavored to quit the Miller. The two conmen readily recognize one another and expose each other's peculiar mode of fraud. The Friar tells the tale of a summoner (one who summons people to appear before the ecclesiastical courts) who makes a pact with the devil and abuses his position as a tool of extortion. The Summoner tells the tale of a begging monk whose facade of poverty and piety is just a cover for greed. Both clerics prey upon the credible. Yet neither can match what Harold Bloom has called the “superb nihilism” of the Pardoner.[82]

The Pardoner—who sells indulgences and traffics in false relics—is the doppelgänger of the Wife of Bath. With his smooth skin, wide staring eyes, long lank hair, and goat-like voice, he is more “a gelding” than a man.[83] Yet he is as ready to “confess” and revel in his own knavery as the Wife is in her exuberant vitality and sexual arts. He always preaches on the evils of avarice in order to soften up his marks and make them free with their money.

For myn entente [intention] is nat but for to winne [profit],
And nothing for correccioun of sinne:
I rekke [care] nevere, whan that they ben beried [buried],

Though that hir soules goon a-blakeberied [blackberrying, i.e., wandering]![84]

He cares nothing for the salvation of his listeners. He cares nothing for his own salvation. He is a purely negative force, an archetype of evil, hypocrisy, and cold indifference.[85] Yet he is a highly effective preacher for all that, and in lieu of a tale he delivers to the pilgrims his usual sermon. At the end, he even offers to sell them indulgences and the chance to kiss his relics. The other pilgrims are furious with his arrogant assumption that they can still be duped despite the fact that he has already revealed himself as a godless fraud.

The Prioress's Tale of a boy who sings hymns to the Virgin Mother even after his throat has been slit is both anti-Semitic and precious to the point of religious hysteria. But it is, at least, intended by the Prioress to be uplifting. The Lawyer presents a story of the aptly named Constance, who perseveres in her Christian beliefs through countless trials. And the Second Nun offers the seemingly inspiring tale of the martyrdom of Saint Cecilia. Yet one cannot take even these stories wholly at face value. As Derek Pearsall notes, “There always seems to be a space left for skepticism, for a superior otherness of viewpoint which will see pathos as sentimentality and religion as religiosity.”[86] Chaucer always “keeps open the ironical option.”[87]

Except, that is, when he doesn't. In what was clearly intended as the final tale, as the party approaches Canterbury and the end of their journey, the Host calls upon the Parson. “He was a shepherde and noght a mercenarie,” a man who taught the gospel to high and low alike, but “first he folwed it himselve.”[88] Yet the Parson flatly refuses to tell any tales. “Thou getest fable noon y-told for [by] me,” he says.[89] He dismisses all “swich wrecchednesse” [such miserable things].[90] “I can nat geste—rum, ram, ruf—by lettre. / Ne, God wot, rym holde I but litel bettre [I cannot compose nonsense romances, nor God knows do I value rhyme any better].”[91] All he will offer his listeners is “moralitee and vertuous matere.”[92] And that is what he does offer, in a long prose sermon on penitence and the seven deadly sins.

The gentle Parson promises to “knitte up al this feeste and make an ende.”[93] He will thus quit all that has gone before in both senses of that term: he will take the measure of it and end the game. The Parson rejects the entire enterprise of telling stories to pass the time. The only proper use of speech is to affirm one's faith in God.[94] God's truth is all *sentence* and all *solas*. Everything else is a delusion and a temptation. The Parson's Tale—necessarily the last—presents itself as an

alternative to all that came before. The pilgrimage of life naturally draws to its end in penance and a focus on the eternal life to come.

Is there room for irony even here? Not within the confines of the Parson's humorless, if powerful, sermon. But recall that each of the pilgrims lays claim to his or her own version of the truth. They present self-contained visions of reality reflecting their personalities, backgrounds, and concerns. Each offers an account of the world that is complete in itself and incompatible with those of others. And yet they coexist. The *Canterbury Tales* as a whole offers us truth in all its relativity even as each tale is presented with its separate claims. In that kaleidoscope of "Goddes privetee" (God's plenty), Chaucer's genius finds its true home.

The Parson's Tale, even if accepted as God's truth, rather than the truth of an individual teller, does not truly negate what has gone before. It simply provides another, still broader perspective that purports to transcend all the partial truths of the other tales and, thus, to transcend the fragmentation and division of daily life.[95] Like Troilus ascending to the highest sphere of heaven and gazing down at the wretched little world where all is vanity and blind desire, the Parson echoes the injunction to "al oure herte on heven caste."[96]

So, too, does Chaucer himself in the remarkable and disheartening "retraccioun" with which he ends the *Canterbury Tales*. There, he apologizes for his "endytinges of worldly vanitees" [works of worldly vanity], including those of the *Canterbury Tales* "that sounen into sinne" [that lead toward sin].[97] He implores Christ, the Blessed Mother, and all the saints of heaven: "from hennes forth, unto my lyves ende, sende me grace to biwayle [bewail] my giltes, and to studie to the salvacioun of my soule."[98]

Is there room for irony even here? Some would dismiss the retraction as a mere conventional nod to piety and grace, for social or political reasons. Others see a radical conversion by Chaucer in the face of death. Interestingly, though, there is some evidence that Chaucer wrote both the Parson's sermon and the retraction before some of the other tales he dismisses as "swich wrecchednesse." That would put Chaucer rather in the position of Augustine asking God for chastity, "but not just yet."

Regardless how we read the retraction, it is clear that Chaucer does get to have it both ways: he tells his many tales and then transcends and dismisses them at the end of the pilgrimage.[99] The enigma that is Chaucer the poet, Chaucer the pilgrim, and Chaucer the man can never be fully resolved. Yet even if the retraction is utterly sincere, I personally envision Chaucer on his deathbed echoing the Wife of Bath:

It tikleth me aboute myn herte rote.
Unto this day it dooth myn herte bote
That I have had my world as in my tyme.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have not tried to document every source for the ideas in this book. But my extensive debt to generations of medieval scholars and translators will be obvious to those in the field. I have tried to list the books and articles on which I most relied, as well as those from which general readers would most benefit, in the section "Suggestions for Further Reading." I also cite there in full the excellent translations of R. S. Pine-Coffin, Joel C. Relihan, Seamus Heaney, Betty Radice, Glyn Burgess, William W. Kibler, Regis J. Armstrong, Ignatius C. Brady, Anthony Esolen, Mark Musa, Wayne A. Rebhorn, and others, from which the quotations in the text are derived.

Oxford historian Emily Winkler read the chapters as they were written and made numerous helpful suggestions and corrections. I benefited greatly from the writings of Boston College philosopher Eileen Sweeney, who also read the finished book and provided generous comments in support.

Darrin Leverette scrupulously polished the entire manuscript, checking the citations, the facts, and the prose. His intelligence, attention to detail, willingness to track down obscure sources, and sensitivity to the nuances of language were all indispensable. So, too, was the work of Susan Cohen and Bernadette Murphy, who carefully and thoughtfully read each chapter. My longtime assistant, Marilyn Williams, without whom I would never accomplish anything, kept the entire project on schedule and put the manuscript in its final form.

I was fortunate yet again to have Jade Zora Scibilia as my editor at Prometheus Books. She has a wonderful ear for language and a sharp eye for imprecision. The book is much improved thanks to her efforts. She was also, as always, a delight to work with.

My greatest thanks, of course, goes to my wife, Lucy, and to my three children—Baird, Cole, and Camille—who sustained, encouraged, and inspired me throughout the writing of this book.

# CHRONOLOGY

| | |
|---|---|
| **New Testament** | ca. 50–ca. 100 |
| Plotinus | 204/5–270 |
| Battle of the Milvian Bridge | 312 |
| Conversion of Constantine | 312 |
| Council of Nicaea / Nicene Creed | 325 |
| Saint Ambrose | ca. 340–397 |
| Saint Jerome | ca. 347–420 |
| **Augustine** | 354–430 |
| Julian the Apostate | r. 361–363 |
| Battle of Adrianople | 378 |
| Theodosius | r. 379–395 |
| Invasion of Italy by Alaric | 401 |
| Sack of Rome by Alaric | 410 |
| Romulus Augustus | r. 475–476 |
| Odoacer | r. 476–493 |
| **Boethius** | ca. 480–524 |
| Clovis | r. 481–511 |
| Cassiodorus | ca. 490–ca. 585 |
| Theodoric | r. 493–526 |
| Procopius | ca. 500–ca. 560 |
| Justinian | r. 527–565 |
| Rule of Saint Benedict | ca. 530 |
| Gothic Wars | 535–554 |
| Gregory of Tours | ca. 538–593/4 |
| Pope Gregory the Great | ca. 540–604; r. 590–604 |
| Muhammad | ca. 570–632 |
| Venerable Bede | 672–735 |
| Muslim Siege of Constantinople | 718 |
| Battle of Tours | 732 |
| Pippin III Deposes Last of Merovingian Kings | 751 |
| Crowning of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor | 800 |

| | |
|---|---|
| ***Beowulf*** | ca. 800 |
| Death of Charlemagne | 814 |
| Alfred the Great | r. 871–899 |
| Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā) | 980–1037 |
| Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (El Cid) | ca. 1043–1099 |
| Pope Leo IX | r. 1049–1054 |
| Great Schism | 1054 |
| Battle of Hastings | 1066 |
| Pope Gregory VII | r. 1073–1085 |
| Investiture Conflict | 1075–1122 |
| **Abelard** | ca. 1079–1142 |
| Domesday Book | 1086 |
| First Crusade | 1096–1099 |
| ***Song of Roland*** | ca. 1100 |
| **Heloise** | ca. 1100–1164 |
| Concordat of Worms | 1122 |
| Averroës (Ibn Rushd) | 1126–1198 |
| **Chrétien de Troyes** | 1130–1191 |
| Louis VII | r. 1137–1180 |
| Henry II | r. 1154–1189 |
| Frederick Barbarossa | r. 1155–1190 |
| Murder of Thomas Becket | 1170 |
| Saint Dominic of Spain | ca. 1170–1221 |
| Philip Augustus | r. 1180–1223 |
| **Francis of Assisi** | 1181/2–1226 |
| Jerusalem Reconquered by Muslims | 1187 |
| Sack of Constantinople during Fourth Crusade | 1204 |
| Albigensian Crusade | 1209–1229 |
| The Long Peace | 1214–1294 |
| Signing of Magna Carta | 1215 |
| **Thomas Aquinas** | 1224/5–1274 |
| Pope Gregory IX | r. 1227–1241 |
| **Dante** | 1265–1321 |
| Pope Boniface VIII | r. 1294–1303 |
| Dante Exiled from Florence | 1302 |
| Petrarch | 1304–1374 |
| Avignon Papacy (“Babylonian Captivity”) | 1309–1377 |
| **Boccaccio** | 1313–1375 |
| William Langland | ca. 1332–ca. 1386 |
| Jean Froissart | ca. 1337–ca. 1405 |
| Hundred Years’ War | 1337–1453 |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Chaucer** | ca. 1343–1400 |
| Battle of Crécy | 1346 |
| Black Death in Europe | 1346–1353 |
| Battle of Poitiers | 1356 |
| Western Schism | 1378–1417 |
| Peasants' Revolt | 1381 |
| Battle of Nicopolis | 1396 |
| Battle of Agincourt | 1415 |
| Joan of Arc Lifts English Siege of Orléans | 1429 |
| Joan of Arc Burned at the Stake | 1431 |
| Fall of Byzantine Empire | 1453 |

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# NOTES

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## INTRODUCTION: THE MIDDLE AGES

1. The groundbreaking work that launched Late Antiquity as a separate field of study was Peter Brown's *The World of Late Antiquity: From Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

2. This trend is carried to its extreme by Susan Wise Bauer in her recent book *The History of the Renaissance World* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), which begins in 1100 and *ends* in 1453.

3. William Manchester, *A World Lit Only by Fire: The Medieval Mind and the Renaissance* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), p. 3.

4. Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), p. xiii.

5. Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400–1000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), p. 11.

6. The historical summary in this introduction draws on the sources listed in the Suggestions for Further Reading. Where appropriate, more detailed discussions of particular periods are contained in the individual chapters.

7. Barbara H. Rosenwein, *A Short History of the Middle Ages*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), p. 6.

8. Ibid., p. 25.
9. Procopius, *The Secret History*, trans. G. A. Williamson and Peter Sarris, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 1.

10. Ibid., p. 25.
11. Ibid., p. 35.
12. See ibid., p. 38.
13. Ibid., p. 73.
14. The five pillars of Islam are (1) believing that there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet; (2) praying to Mecca five times a day; (3) giving *zakat* (alms to the poor); (4) fasting during the month of Ramadan; and (5) making the *hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca).
15. See Norman F. Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), pp. 133–35.
16. H. St. L. B. Moss, *The Birth of the Middle Ages* (London: Folio Society, 1998), p. 218.
17. Ibid.
18. Cantor, *Civilization of the Middle Ages*, p. 187.
19. Moss, *Birth of the Middle Ages*, p. 255.
20. See ibid., p. 465.
21. Morris Bishop, *The Middle Ages* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2001), p. 64.
22. The Dominicans would also play a vital role in the Spanish Inquisition, which began in 1478.
23. Cf. Cantor, *Civilization of the Middle Ages*, p. 492.
24. Interdiction sets an entire city or country outside the sacraments of the church; no masses will be celebrated, confessions heard, or communion given. Even Christian burial in consecrated ground is forbidden.
25. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998).

# CHAPTER 1: THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE INVENTION OF CHRISTIANITY

1. See Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections," in *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 147–73.
2. Reza Aslan, *Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (New York: Random House, 2013), p. 182.
3. Ibid., p. xxxi.
4. For a catalogue of such inconsistencies, see Bart D. Ehrman, *Jesus, Interrupted* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009).
5. Mark 9:1; see also Matt. 16:28 and Luke 9:27. Biblical references are taken from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, rev. 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) (New Revised Standard Version).
6. Luke 9:51.
7. Zech. 9:9.
8. Mark 13:2.

9. See E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), pp. 257–61; Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 112–13.
10. See, for example, Mark 14:58 ("I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.").
11. Matt. 22:21.
12. Aslan, *Zealot*, p. 77.
13. 1 Cor. 15:14.
14. 1 Cor. 15:32 (quoting Isa. 22:13).
15. Mark 16:8.
16. Matt. 28:9.
17. Matt. 28:17.
18. Matt. 28:19.
19. Matt. 28:20.
20. Matt. 28:12–13.
21. Matt. 28:15.
22. Luke 24:4.
23. Luke 24:21.
24. Luke 24:31.
25. Luke 24:37.
26. Luke 24:41.
27. Luke 24:48.
28. Luke 24:51.
29. John 20:14.
30. John 20:18.
31. John 20:19.
32. John 20:29.
33. John 21:4.
34. John 21:12.
35. John 21:20–23.
36. John 21:24.
37. Acts 1:3.
38. Acts 10:40–42.
39. Acts 9:3, 9.
40. Acts 9:4–6.
41. Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 49.
42. Acts 7:51–52.
43. Matt. 15:24.
44. Mark 7:27; see also Matt. 15:26.
45. See Sanders, *Historical Figure of Jesus*, p. 191.
46. Mark 11:12–14; Matt. 21:18–22.
47. Mark 12:9.
48. Gal. 2:7.
49. Acts 13:46.
50. Acts 28:28.
51. Matt. 8:11.
52. Gal. 2:21.
53. Gal. 5:6.
54. Col. 2:17.
55. Rom. 3:29–30.
56. Heb. 6:1.
57. Acts 17:18.

58. Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (1961; repr., Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1985), p. 42.
59. Acts 17:23.
60. Acts 17:24–25.
61. Jaeger, *Early Christianity*, p. 12.
62. 1 Cor. 1:22.
63. The numbers in this paragraph appear to be the best available but are not without controversy. See, for example, Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), chap. 1; *The Bart Ehrman Blog: The History & Literature of Early Christianity*; "Growth Rate of Early Christianity," blog entry by Bart Ehrman, April 23, 2013, http://ehrmanblog.org/growth-rate-of-early-christianity-for-members.
64. Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 8, 102, 171–72.
65. See ibid., pp. 105–13.
66. Mic. 5:2.
67. Matt. 2:15 (quoting Hosea 11:1).
68. Luke 1:38.
69. Matt. 27:24–25.
70. Luke 19:44.
71. Mark 14:36; see also Matt. 26:39.
72. Mark 15:34; see also Matt. 27:46.
73. Luke 23:46.
74. John 13:1.
75. John 10:30.
76. John 8:58.
77. John 1:1–5.
78. John 1:14.
79. John 14:6.
80. John 11:25.
81. John 12:37.
82. John 6:63.
83. Matt. 5:23–24.
84. Matt. 25:40.
85. Matt. 6:2–4.
86. Mark 10:23.
87. Luke 15:31–32.
88. Mark 9:24.
89. Luke 10:29.
90. Luke 10:36.
91. Luke 10:37.
92. Mark 10:21–22.
93. Luke 6:24.
94. Matt. 5:12; Luke 6:23.
95. See Matt. 16:28 ("Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.") and Luke 9:27 (same).
96. Matt. 5:39–41; see also Luke 6:27–31.
97. Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, in *Early Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 57.

98. Matt. 7:13–14.
99. Luke 6:31.
100. Matt. 7:12.
101. Luke 6:32–33.
102. See Plato, *Republic* 335e, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, 4 vols. (Norwalk, CT: Easton, 2001), 3:971.
103. Rom. 12:15–18.
104. Gal. 5:22–23.
105. 1 Cor. 4:10.
106. Prince Myshkin, the young hero of Dostoevsky's novel, is so good-hearted and so ingenuous that the society characters in the novel assume that he is a fool and lacks insight, even as they are drawn to his presence.
107. 1 Cor. 13:1–8.
108. 2 Tim. 4:7.
109. 1 Cor. 13:13.

## CHAPTER 2: AUGUSTINE'S *CONFESSIONS*

1. Augustine, *Confessions*, ed. Michael P. Foley, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006), p. xviii.
2. Maria Boulding, trans., *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, vol. 1 (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1997), p. 11.
3. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Garry Wills (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), p. x.
4. Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (1961; repr., Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1985), p. 66.
5. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), 9.9.
6. Ibid., 1.12.
7. Ibid., 1.7.
8. Ibid., 1.9.
9. Ibid., 1.11.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 1.19.
12. Ibid., 1.9.
13. Ibid., 1.12.
14. Ibid., 2.6.
15. Ibid., 1.13.
16. Ibid., 1.14.
17. Ibid., 2.9.
18. Ibid., 2.2.
19. Ibid., 2.3.
20. Ibid., 2.2.
21. Ibid., 3.1.
22. Ibid., 4.2.
23. Ibid., 3.4.

24. Ibid., 1.13.
25. Ibid., 4.16.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 3.4.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 3.12.
31. Ibid., 4.8.
32. Ibid., 4.4.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 4.7.
36. Ibid., 5.7.
37. Ibid., 5.6.
38. Ibid., 5.8.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 6.1.
42. Ibid., 4.2.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., 6.15.
45. Ibid., 5.14.
46. Ibid., 6.4.
47. Ibid., 5.10.
48. Ibid.

49. Ibid.
50. See, for example, James Wetzel, *Augustine and the Limits of Virtue* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 3.
51. For a full explanation of Plato's views, see Michael Kellogg, *Three Questions We Never Stop Asking* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), chap. 1 (especially pp. 46–55).
52. Plato, *The Symposium*, 201a–e, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, 4 vols. (Norwalk, CT: Easton, 2001), 2:492–93; see Michael K. Kellogg, *The Greek Search for Wisdom* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012), pp. 255–58.
53. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.9.
54. Ibid., 5.14.
55. Ibid., 6.11.
56. Ibid., 6.6.
57. Ibid., 6.11.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid., 8.5.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid., 8.1.
66. Ibid., 8.7.
67. Ibid., 8.8.
68. Ibid., 8.9.
69. Ibid., 8.11.

70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 8.12.
72. Ibid. (quoting Rom. 13:13–14).
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid., 9.10 (italics in original).
76. Ibid., 9.11–12.
77. Eileen Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry in Boethius, Abelard, and Alan of Lille: Words in the Absence of Things* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 2.
78. Emmet T. Flood, "The Narrative Structure of Augustine's *Confessions*: Time's Quest for Eternity," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (June 1988): 152.
79. Augustine, *Confessions*, 1.8.
80. Ludwig Wittgenstein, although a great admirer of Augustine, opens his *Investigations* with a critique of the "Augustinian picture" of language. Although that critique is central to Wittgenstein's later philosophy (see Kellogg, *Three Questions*, pp. 67–72), it does not necessarily undermine the central point Augustine is making in book 10, a point echoed by Wittgenstein himself on pages 59–64 of his *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

81. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.8.
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid., 10.10.
85. Ibid., 10.9.
86. Ibid., 10.10. For an account of Plato's theory of recollection, see Kellogg, *Three Questions*, pp. 32–39.
87. Augustine, *Confessions*, 10.11.
88. Ibid., 10.17.
89. Ibid., 11.5.
90. Ibid., 11.6.
91. Ibid., 11.7.
92. Ibid., 11.11.
93. Ibid., 11.14.
94. Ibid., 11.21.
95. Ibid., 13.4.
96. Louis Mackey, "From Autobiography to Theology: Augustine's *Confessiones*," in *Peregrinations of the Word: Essays in Medieval Philosophy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), p. 52.
97. See Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry*, p. 1.
98. Augustine, *Confessions*, 11.3.
99. 1 Cor. 13:12 (King James Version).
100. Augustine, *Confessions*, 13.29.
101. Ibid., 12.14.
102. Ibid., 12.30.
103. Ibid., 12.25.
104. Ibid., 12.31.
105. Augustine, *De Consensu Evangelistarum*, 4.10.20, quoted in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 140.
106. Mackey, "From Autobiography to Theology," in *Peregrinations of the*

*Word*, p. 53; see also Boulding, *Works of Saint Augustine*, pp. 24–25 ("Human words, however inadequate and stumbling, must remain one with the Word by self-transcendence, or they will degenerate into *loquacitas*, the chatter Augustine deplores.").

# CHAPTER 3: BOETHIUS

1. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1904), p. 190.
2. Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. David R. Slavitt (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. xvi.
3. Eileen Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry in Boethius, Abelard, and Alan of Lille: Words in the Absence of Things* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 39.

4. Quoted in John Moorhead, "Boethius' Life and the World of Late Antique Philosophy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, ed. John Marenbon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 26.
5. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), 1.1.3.
6. See Michael Kellogg, *Three Questions We Never Stop Asking* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), pp. 49–51.
7. See Henry Chadwick, *Boethius: The Consolations of Music, Logic, Theology, and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 225.
8. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 1.1.8, 11.
9. Ibid., 1.2.24–27 (poem 2).
10. Ibid., 1.3.2.
11. Ibid., 1.4.1.
12. Ibid., 1.4.8.
13. Ibid., 1.4.10.
14. Ibid., 1.4.32.
15. Ibid., 1.4.29.
16. Ibid., 1.5.43–45 (poem 5).
17. Ibid., 1.5.1.
18. Ibid., 1.6.4.
19. Ibid., 1.6.15–17.
20. Ibid., 1.5.6.
21. What though the radiance which was once so bright
    Be now for ever taken from my sight,
    Though nothing can bring back the hour
    Of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower;
    We will grieve not, rather find
    Strength in what remains behind.

William Wordsworth, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood," in *The Collected Poems of William Wordsworth* (Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), p. 590.

22. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 2.1.8.

23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 2.1.16.
26. Ibid., 2.3.8.
27. Ibid., 2.3.10.
28. Ibid., 2.4.8.
29. Ibid., 2.4.3.
30. Ibid., 2.4.12.
31. Ibid., 2.4.15.
32. Ibid., 2.5.23.
33. Ibid., 2.7.19.
34. Ibid., 2.8.7.
35. Ibid., 2.4.15–16 (poem 4).
36. Ibid., 2.4.23.
37. Ibid., 3.1.2.
38. Ibid., 2.6.19.
39. Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry*, p. 42.
40. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 3.3.1.
41. See John Marenbon, *Boethius* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 103.
42. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 3.3.5–8.
43. Ibid., 3.5.8–10 (poem 5).
44. Ibid., 3.8.11.
45. Ibid., 3.9.4.
46. Ibid., 3.10.22–28 (poem 9).
47. See Kellogg, *Three Questions*, pp. 122–24.
48. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 3.10.6.
49. Ibid., 3.11.27.
50. Ibid., 3.12.5.
51. Ibid., 3.11.11–12 (poem 11).
52. Ibid., 3.12.47–58 (poem 12).
53. Ibid., 4.3.5.
54. Ibid., 4.4.24.
55. Ibid., 4.3.21.
56. Ibid., 4.4.26.
57. Ibid., 4.5.2.
58. Ibid., 4.6.2–3.
59. Ibid., 4.6.
60. Ibid., 4.6.11.
61. Job 38:4, 40:8.
62. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 4.6.42.
63. Ibid., 4.7.3.
64. Ibid., 4.7.22.
65. Ibid., 4.7.32–35 (poem 7).
66. Ibid., 5.1.1.
67. Ibid., 5.1.5.
68. Ibid., 5.1.3.
69. Ibid., 5.1.8.
70. Ibid., 5.1.9.
71. Ibid., 5.1.14.
72. Ibid., 5.1.18.
73. See Elaine Scarry, *Resisting Representation* (New York: Oxford University

Press, 1994), p. 146.

74. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.3.34.

75. Ibid., 5.2.10.

76. See Kellogg, *Three Questions*, pp. 122–29.

77. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.2.11.

78. Ibid., 5.3.4.

79. Ibid., 5.3.30.

80. Ibid., 5.4.2.

81. Ibid., 5.6.15.

82. Ibid., 5.6.30.

83. Ibid., 5.6.44.

84. Ibid., 5.6.48.

85. Joel C. Relihan, *The Prisoner's Philosophy: Life and Death in Boethius's "Consolation"* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), p. 14.

86. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, p. xx.

87. Marenbon, *Boethius*, p. 112.

88. The sentence reads: "For such is the force of [God's] knowledge, embracing all things by its present-moment knowledge, that it has itself established the status of all things, while it owes nothing to things that are subsequent to it." Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6.43.

89. Marenbon, *Boethius*, p. 145.

90. Ibid. Relihan, in the notes to his translation, makes the same point about the same sentence but in more muted form, noting: "If 'has itself established the status' means 'defined them as they are,' and 'owes nothing to things that are subsequent to it' refers to time itself, 'after they have been set into motion,' then all is fixed from the moment of creation." Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, p. 198 (quoting 5.6.43). But there is, of course, no reason to read the words in that sense, particularly since Philosophy has just established that God is atemporal and hence knows all in an eternal present and thus cannot, by definition, be said to owe anything to things that are subsequent to it.

91. See Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry*, p. 60.

92. Danuta Shanzer, "Interpreting the *Consolation*," in Marenbon, *Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, p. 233.

93. Relihan makes the point aggressively. See Relihan, *Prisoner's Philosophy*, p. ix ("*Consolation* is a Christian work that dramatizes not the truths of philosophy as a whole but the limits of pagan philosophy in particular."). Marenbon, while dismissing Relihan's reading as "unconvincing," ends up in the same place. See Marenbon, *Boethius*, pp. 161, 163 ("As a Christian author," Boethius recognizes that only Christianity will close the gap between philosophy and the highest good, but he "leaves the structure of his dialogue to make the point silently.").

94. Relihan, *Prisoner's Philosophy*, pp. 1, 9.

95. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, pp. xxiv–xxv.

96. Shanzer, "Interpreting the *Consolation*," in Marenbon, *Cambridge Companion to Boethius*, p. 243.

97. See ibid., p. 244 (Boethius "was an innovator in casting a serious work, with a tragic frame-narrative, in what had been a serio-comic form."). Even on the Relihan/Marenbon approach, Boethius would have been adopting Menippean satire to a new, Christian purpose.

98. See Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry*, p. 61. Marenbon claims that the poems merely provide diversions from or echoes of the arguments in the text and contribute nothing "to the dramatic progress of the narrative of Boethius's cure or to the flow of reasoning." Marenbon, *Boethius*, p. 147. This reductionist approach

unsurprisingly leads Marenbon to mistake both the cure and the flow of reasoning.

99. See Michael K. Kellogg, *The Greek Search for Wisdom* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2012), chap. 9.
100. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 1.6.
101. Ibid., 1.6.4.
102. See, for example, ibid., 4.6.21, 54.
103. Ibid., 5.4.2; see also Scarry, *Resisting Representation*, p. 152.
104. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 5.6.47–48.
105. Ibid., 4.1.9.
106. Ibid., p. xx.
107. Plato, *Phaedo*, 81a, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, 4 vols. (Norwalk, CT: Easton, 2001), 1:49.
108. See, for example, Relihan, *Prisoner's Philosophy*, pp. 5, 15, 31.
109. Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, p. xi.
110. Chadwick, *Boethius*, p. 251.
111. Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Paradiso*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling, vol. 3 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), canto 10, ll. 124–29.

# CHAPTER 4: *BEOWULF* AND THE HEROIC IDEAL

1. See M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2002).
2. J. R. R. Tolkien, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," in *"Beowulf": A Verse Translation*, ed. Daniel Donoghue, trans. Seamus Heaney (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002), p. 103.
3. Arthur K. McComb, ed., *The Selected Letters of Bernard Berenson* (London: Hutchinson, 1965), p. 294.
4. See Ruth A. Johnston, *A Companion to "Beowulf"* (Gibsonia, PA: Pannebaker, 2011), p. 2.
5. See Herbert G. Wright, "Good and Evil; Light and Darkness; Joy and Sorrow in *Beowulf*," in *An Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), pp. 257–67.
6. Marie Padgett Hamilton, "The Religious Principle in *Beowulf*," in Nicholson, *Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism*, p. 106 (quoting Frederick Klaeber).
7. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, p. xxv.
8. Alvin A. Lee, "Symbolism and Allegory," in *A "Beowulf" Handbook*, ed. Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 238.
9. Harold Bloom, ed., *Bloom's Reviews: "Beowulf"* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House, 1999), p. 6.
10. Tolkien, "*Beowulf*: The Monsters and the Critics," in Donoghue, *Beowulf*, p. 120 n.1.
11. Roberta Frank, "The *Beowulf* Poet's Sense of History," in Donoghue, *Beowulf*, pp. 179–80.
12. See Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400–1000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).
13. Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity,*

*A.D. 200–1000*, rev. ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 341.

14. Ibid., p. 132.

15. Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, trans. Leo Sherley-Price, rev. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 4.24.

16. Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge, trans., *Alfred the Great: Asser's "Life of King Alfred" and Other Contemporary Sources* (1983; repr., London: Penguin Books, 2004), p. 47.

17. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 2–3.

18. The celebrated opening of the *Aeneid*, later taken as the title of a play by George Bernard Shaw, is *Arma virumque cano* ("Of arms and the man I sing").

19. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, l. 46.

20. Ibid., ll. 69–72.

21. Ibid., p. xxviii.

22. Ibid., ll. 82–85, 313.

23. Ibid., ll. 86–89.

24. Ibid., ll. 89–93.

25. Ibid., ll. 103–104.

26. Ibid., l. 100.

27. Ibid., ll. 130–31.

28. Ibid., ll. 412–14.

29. Ibid., l. 151.

30. Ibid., ll. 380–81.

31. Ibid., ll. 368–70.

32. Ibid., l. 357.

33. Ibid., ll. 440–41, 455.

34. Ibid., ll. 517–18.

35. Ibid., ll. 527–28.

36. Ibid., ll. 599–601.

37. Ibid., ll. 649–51.

38. Ibid., ll. 660–61.

39. Ibid., ll. 730–32.

40. Ibid., ll. 801–802.

41. Edward B. Irving Jr., "The Text of Fate," in *Interpretations of "Beowulf": A Critical Anthology*, ed. R. D. Fulk (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 184.

42. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, l. 845.

43. Ibid., ll. 849–51.

44. Ibid., ll. 945–46.

45. Ibid., ll. 1016–18.

46. Ibid., ll. 1179–85.

47. Ibid., ll. 1233–34.

48. Theodore M. Andersson, "Tradition and Design in *Beowulf*," in Fulk, *Interpretations of "Beowulf,"* p. 224.

49. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 1355–57.

50. Jane Chance, "The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel's Mother," in Donoghue, *Beowulf*, p. 159.

51. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, l. 1378.

52. Extract from Fidel Fajardo-Acosta, *The Condemnation of Heroism in the Tragedy of "Beowulf"* (Lewiston, NY: E. Mellen, 1989), in Bloom, *Bloom's Reviews: "Beowulf,"* p. 62.

53. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, l. 1442.

54. Ibid., ll. 1491–95.
55. Ibid., l. 1542.
56. Ibid., ll. 1594–99.
57. Ibid., ll. 1716–18.
58. Ibid., ll. 1735–39.
59. Ibid., ll. 1774–75.
60. Ibid., ll. 1759–60.
61. Ibid., ll. 2207–10.
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63. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Ulysses," ll. 65–70, in *Alfred Tennyson: The Major Works*, ed. Adam Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 81.
64. R. E. Kaske, "*Sapientia et Fortitudo* as the Controlling Theme of *Beowulf*," in Nicholson, *Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism*, p. 269.
65. Chance, "Structural Unity of *Beowulf*," in Donoghue, *Beowulf*, pp. 152–53.
66. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 2247–53.
67. Ibid., ll. 2331–33.
68. Ibid., ll. 2419–23.
69. See Laurence N. de Looze, "Frame Narratives and Fictionalization: Beowulf as Narrator," in Fulk, *Interpretations of "Beowulf,"* p. 245.
70. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 2497–2500.
71. Ibid., ll. 2813–14.
72. Ibid., ll. 2814–16.
73. Ibid., ll. 287–89.
74. Ibid., ll. 1842–45.
75. Kaske, "*Sapientia et Fortitudo*," in Nicholson, *Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism*, p. 269.
76. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 24–25.
77. Ibid., ll. 794–96.
78. Extract from E. Talbot Donaldson, trans., *"Beowulf": A New Prose Translation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), in Bloom, *Bloom's Reviews: "Beowulf,"* p. 48.
79. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 1384–85.
80. Ibid., ll. 1386–89.
81. Andersson, "Tradition and Design in *Beowulf*," in Fulk, *Interpretations of "Beowulf,"* p. 224.
82. See Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 2347–51 (He had scant regard / for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all / of its courage or strength, for he had kept going / often in the past, through perils and ordeals / of every sort…).
83. Ibid., l. 3084.
84. Ibid., ll. 612–28.
85. Ibid., ll. 1168–1231.
86. Ibid., ll. 1070–1157.
87. Ibid., ll. 2063–66.

88. F. A. Blackburn, "The Christian Coloring in the *Beowulf*," in Nicholson, *Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism*, pp. 1–2.
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90. Ibid., p. 12.
91. Ibid., p. 21.
92. Ibid., p. 14.
93. Morton W. Bloomfield, "*Beowulf* and Christian Allegory: An Interpretation of Unferth," in Nicholson, *Anthology of "Beowulf" Criticism*, p. 160.

94. M. B. McNamee, "*Beowulf*—An Allegory of Salvation?" in Fulk, *Interpretations of "Beowulf,"* pp. 90–92.

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97. Quoted in Larry D. Benson, "The Pagan Coloring of *Beowulf*," in *The "Beowulf" Reader*, ed. Peter S. Baker (New York: Garland Publishing, 2000), p. 36.

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99. Marijane Osborn, "The Great Feud: Scriptural History and Strife in *Beowulf*," in Baker, *"Beowulf" Reader*, p. 119.

100. John D. Niles, "Introduction: *Beowulf*, Truth, and Meaning," in Bjork and Niles, *"Beowulf" Handbook*, p. 5.

101. Osborn, "Great Feud," in Baker, *"Beowulf" Reader*, p. 111.

102. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 3180–82.

103. George Clark, "The Hero and the Theme," in Bjork and Niles, *"Beowulf" Handbook*, p. 284.

104. Donoghue, *Beowulf*, ll. 2819–20.

105. Fred C. Robinson, "The Tomb of Beowulf," in Donoghue, *Beowulf*, p. 182.

# CHAPTER 5: ABELARD AND HELOISE

1. *Carmina Burana* means, literally, *Songs from Beuern*. The manuscript of 254 poems was discovered in a Benedictine monastery in Bavaria in 1803. Twenty-four of the poems were set dramatically to music by Carl Orff in 1936.

2. Betty Radice, trans., *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, rev. M. T. Clanchy (London: Penguin Books, 2003), letter 1, p. 20.

3. Peter Abelard, *"Sic et Non": A Critical Edition*, ed. Blanche B. Boyer and Richard McKeon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 103, ll. 338–39.

4. One of Abelard's biblical oratorios, *Samson dux fortissime*, is available from Sequentia, *Visions from the Book*, BMG Music, 1996, compact disc.

5. Eileen Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry in Boethius, Abelard, and Alan of Lille: Words in the Absence of Things* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 90.

6. See Constant J. Mews, *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France*, 2nd ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 147.

7. Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, letter 1, p. 3.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., pp. 3–4.

10. Ibid., p. 4.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

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14. Ibid., p. 8.

15. Ibid., p. 9.
16. Ibid., p. 10.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Dante, *The Divine Comedy: Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), canto 5, l. 138.
20. Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, letter 1, p. 11.
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22. Ibid., p. 16.
23. Ibid., p. 17.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 18 (quoting *Pharsalia*, 8.94–98).
26. Ibid., p. 30 (quoting Luke 16:3).
27. Ibid., p. 32.
28. Ibid., p. 33.
29. Ibid., p. 40.
30. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. David Bevington and David Scott Kastan (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), 3.2.60.
31. Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, letter 1, p. 43 (quoting Prov. 12:21 [Vulgate]).
32. See Constant J. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 8.
33. Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, letter 2, p. 47.
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35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., p. 49.
37. Ibid., p. 50.
38. Ibid., p. 51.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., p. 52.
42. Ibid., p. 53.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid., p. 55.
45. Ibid., letter 3, p. 56.
46. Ibid., p. 62.
47. Ibid., letter 4, p. 65.
48. Ibid., p. 68.
49. Ibid. (emphasis added).
50. Ibid., p. 69.
51. Ibid., letter 5, p. 72.
52. Ibid., p. 77.
53. Ibid., p. 89.
54. Ibid., letter 6, p. 93.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., p. 94.
57. Ibid.
58. Mews, *Abelard and Heloise*, p. 25.
59. For a full account of Wittgenstein's views, see Michael Kellogg, *Three Questions We Never Stop Asking* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2010), chap. 2.
60. John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 333.

61. Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry*, p. 73.
62. See M. T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), p. 39.
63. See chap. 2.
64. Sweeney, *Logic, Theology, and Poetry*, p. 81.
65. Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, letter 1, p. 20.
66. Ibid.
67. Abelard, *Sic et Non*, p. 103, ll. 333–34.
68. Bernard of Clairvaux, letter 193, quoted in James Burge, *Abelard & Heloise: A New Biography* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), p. 244.
69. Ibid., quoted in Clanchy, *Abelard*, p. 151.
70. Bernard of Clairvaux, letter 190, quoted in Clanchy, *Abelard*, p. 169.
71. Marenbon, *Philosophy of Peter Abelard*, p. 335.
72. Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, p. 211.
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75. Plato, *Euthyphro*, 10a, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper, 4 vols. (Norwalk, CT: Easton, 2001), 1:1.
76. Peter Abelard, *Ethics*, in Spade, *Ethical Writings*, p. 23.
77. This is a contention that the German philosopher Immanuel Kant will develop during the eighteenth century. See Kellogg, *Three Questions*, pp. 124–29.
78. Abelard, *Ethics*, in Spade, *Ethical Writings*, p. 24.
79. Abelard, *Dialogue*, in Spade, *Ethical Writings*, p. 64.
80. Radice, *Letters of Abelard and Heloise*, letter 2, p. 54.
81. Mews, *Lost Love Letters*, letter 112a, p. 311.

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3. Eugene Vance, *Reading "The Song of Roland"* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 19.
4. Burgess, *Song of Roland*, ll. 40–43, 58–59.
5. Ibid., ll. 24–26.
6. Ibid., ll. 140–41.
7. Ibid., l. 167.
8. Ibid., l. 213.
9. See ibid., ll. 3758–59.
10. Ibid., l. 234.
11. Ibid., l. 240.
12. Ibid., ll. 277–79.
13. Ibid., ll. 289–91.

14. Ibid., ll. 300–301.
15. Ibid., l. 330.
16. Ibid., ll. 597–98.
17. Ibid., l. 690.
18. Ibid., ll. 703–706.
19. Ibid., l. 716.
20. Ibid., l. 760.
21. Vance, *Reading "The Song of Roland,"* p. 40.
22. Burgess, *Song of Roland*, l. 815.
23. Ibid., l. 1008.
24. Ibid., ll. 1013–14.
25. Ibid., l. 1099.
26. Ibid., ll. 1070–71.
27. Ibid., ll. 1073–75.
28. Ibid., ll. 1159–61.
29. Ibid., ll. 1723–29.
30. Ibid., l. 1093.
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32. Ibid., p. 71.
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35. Vance, *Reading "The Song of Roland,"* p. 57 (translation of *Song of Roland*, l. 2009).
36. Burgess, *Song of Roland*, l. 2153.
37. Ibid., l. 2183.
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43. Ibid., l. 2961.
44. Ibid., l. 3164.
45. Ibid., l. 3672.
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47. Ibid., ll. 3775–78.
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51. Ibid., l. 3909.
52. Ibid., ll. 3988–89.
53. Ibid., l. 2524.
54. Vance, *Reading "The Song of Roland,"* p. 65.
55. Ibid., p. 92.
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58. Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1966), p. 19.
59. Eugene Mason, trans., *Wace and Layamon: Arthurian Chronicles* (1912;

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62. Ibid., p. 60.

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66. Uitti, *Chrétien de Troyes Revisited*, pp. 51–52.

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72. Ibid., p. 216.

73. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, "*Le Chevalier de la Charrette*: That Obscure Object of Desire, Lancelot," in Lacy and Grimbert, *Companion to Chrétien de Troyes*, p. 143.

74. Joseph J. Duggan, *The Romances of Chrétien de Troyes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 172.

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79. Ibid., p. 326.

80. Ibid.

81. Wilfred Sheed is credited with having said, "The American male does not mature until he has exhausted all other possibilities."

82. Chrétien de Troyes, *Yvain*, in Kibler, *Arthurian Romances*, p. 330.

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86. Chrétien de Troyes, *Cligés*, in Kibler, *Arthurian Romances*, p. 123.

# CHAPTER 7: FRANCIS AND AQUINAS

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3. G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi*, ed. Paul A Böer Sr. (N.p.: Veritatis Splendor Publications, 2013), pp. 7–8.
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13. Ibid., p. 103.
14. Francis of Assisi, "Admonitions," 2.3–4, in Armstrong and Brady, *Complete Works*.
15. Ibid., 2.
16. Francis of Assisi, "Letter to the Entire Order," 23, 29, in Armstrong and Brady, *Complete Works*.
17. Francis of Assisi, "Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful," 45, in Armstrong and Brady, *Complete Works*.
18. Francis of Assisi, "Earlier Rule," 1.1, in Armstrong and Brady, *Complete Works*.
19. Francis of Assisi, "Later Rule," 10.7, in Armstrong and Brady, *Complete Works*.
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21. Francis of Assisi, "Earlier Rule," 6.13.
22. Ibid., 17.7.
23. Ibid., 14.1.
24. Ibid., 8.11.
25. Ibid., 8.6.
26. Ibid., 17.14.
27. Ibid., 22.5.
28. Francis of Assisi, "Later Rule," 2.17.
29. Francis of Assisi, "Earlier Rule," 3.12–13.
30. Ibid., 5.9.
31. Francis of Assisi, "Later Rule," 7.2–3.
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33. Francis of Assisi, "Later Rule," 9.2–3.
34. Francis of Assisi, "Testament," 38–39, in Armstrong and Brady, *Complete Works*.
35. Francis of Assisi, "Letter to the Entire Order," 51.
36. Francis of Assisi, "Earlier Rule," 9.2.
37. Francis of Assisi, "True and Perfect Joy," 7, in Armstrong and Brady, *Complete Works*.
38. Ibid., 8–15.
39. Dante, *Paradise*, ed. and trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2007), canto 11.19–24.
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43. Chesterton, *Saint Thomas*, p. 78.
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## CHAPTER 8: DANTE AND THE *COMMEDIA*

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11. Ibid., chap. 5.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., chap. 7.

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15. Ibid., chap. 35.

16. Ibid., chap. 37.

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18. Dante, *Vita Nuova*, chap. 42.

19. Ibid.

20. Dante, *Inferno*, p. v.

21. Dante, *Paradise*, ed. and trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: Modern Library, 2007), canto 17.55–60.

22. Ibid., canto 17.69.

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27. Dante, *Paradise*, app. A, p. 365.

28. See Michael K. Kellogg, *The Roman Search for Wisdom* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2014), p. 160.

29. Dante, *Paradise*, app. A, p. 365.

30. Honoré de Balzac would also call his own series of interlinked nineteenth-century novels portraying the France of his day the *Comédie Humaine*.

31. Auerbach, *Dante*, p. 133.

32. Eliot, "Dante," in *Selected Essays*, p. 218.

33. Dante, *Inferno*, canto 1.1–3 (my translation).

34. See generally Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Reading Dante* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 25–32.

35. "The years of our life are seventy." Ps. 90:10.

36. Dante, *Inferno*, canto 1.11–12.

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38. Ibid., canto 1.8.

39. Ibid., canto 1.17–18.

40. Ibid., canto 1.82–87.

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42. Ibid., canto 3.1–9.
43. Eliot, “Dante,” in *Selected Essays*, p. 211.
44. Plautus, *Two Sisters Named Bacchis*, trans. James Tatum, in *Plautus: The Comedies*, ed. David R. Slavitt and Palmer Bovie, vol. 2 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 188.

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49. Ibid., canto 4.134.
50. Prue Shaw, *Reading Dante: From Here to Eternity* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2014), p. 79.
51. Dante, *Inferno*, canto 5.74–75.
52. Dante, *Vita Nuova*, chap. 20 (“Love and the gracious heart [*cor gentil*] are but one thing.”).
53. Dante, *Inferno*, canto 5.100–106.
54. Ibid., canto 5.121–23. See Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. Joel C. Relihan (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), 2.4.2 (“In all of Fortune's adversities the most unhappy sort of misfortune is that one was happy once.”).
55. Dante, *Inferno*, canto 5.127–37.
56. See Mazzotta, *Reading Dante*, pp. 42–45.
57. Dante, *Inferno*, canto 10.36.
58. Ibid., canto 10.51.
59. Ibid., canto 10.58–60.
60. Ibid., canto 10.69.
61. Ibid., canto 10.91–93.
62. Mazzotta, *Reading Dante*, p. 60.
63. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 199.
64. Dante, *Inferno*, canto 12.49–50.
65. Ibid., canto 14.65.
66. Ibid., canto 15.106–107.
67. Ibid., canto 15.82–87.
68. Ibid., canto 15.121–24.
69. Ibid., canto 26.29.
70. Ibid., canto 26.97–99.
71. See ibid., canto 26.112–20. The translation in text is one I memorized in college, more than forty years ago. Unfortunately, although I can picture the cover, I no longer have the book and cannot remember the translator. Not even the wonders of Google have been able to retrieve it from the ocean of time. Yet it is still the best and most stirring translation I know of this passage.
72. Ibid., canto 26.137–42.
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# INDEX


Abbasid dynasty, 19
abbots, 21, 24–25, 147–48, 156, 252, 262
Abelard, Peter, 9–10, 33
    abbey of Saint-Médard, confined to, 147
    abbot at Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys monastery, 148
    Abbot Suger of Saint-Denis, 148
    affair became an open secret, 145
    anger and jealousy, consumed with, 143
    Anselm of Laon, studied divinity with, 143
    Astrolabe (son), 145, 283
    Athanasian Creed, 147
    Berengar (Abelard's father), 141–42
    Bernard, 156–58
    birth and family, 141–42
    castrated by Fulbert's kinsmen, 146, 152
    Catholic doctrine, various questions of, 147–48
    Christ, eternal union in beatitude with, 161
    Christ, incarnation of, 157–58, 161
    Christians must be logicians, 156
    Christian virtue and pagan philosophers, 158
    church doctrines, 156, 160
    church fathers were not infallible, 156
    condemned as a heretic, 140
    confession of faith, 158–59
    considering castration as punishment, 152
    Corbeil, school in, 142
    Council of Sens, 158, 163
    Count Theobald, protection of, 147
    death of, 163
    dialectical disputes, 154
    dialectical reasoning and religion, 156
    emotional breakdown, 143
    ethics, 159–61
    excommunication, 158
    Ezekiel passage, lecture on, 144
    Fulbert (Cathedral of Notre-Dame canon), 144–46, 150–51
    gap between physical intimacy and emotional and spiritual union, 141
    God
        cannot do evil, 159
        created the world, 155

is bound by ethics, 159
is embodiment of perfect goodness, 159
orders the universe, 159
Heloise
letters and songs to, 152, 162
letters of, 152–53, 162
married in a private ceremony, 146
pressing her to take her vows as a nun, 146
private study of letters led to physical intimacy with, 144–45
writing secular love songs to, 145
hermitage in Troyes, 147
*Historia*, 148–50, 161–62
*History of His Calamities* (*Historia Calamitatum*), 141–49

logic, 154–55
love, 161–63
man's natural love of God, 160
metaphysical substructure created by God, 155
Milan, founded school in, 142
monastic life, 140
Mont-Sainte-Geneviève, 143
moral philosophy, 159
natural law governs moral life of Jews, Christians, and pagans, 160
nominalism, 154–55
Notre-Dame, master at cathedral school of, 144
original sin, 157–58
paranoia, suffering from, 147–48
Père Lachaise cemetery, 163
philosopher, logician, and charismatic teacher, 140
philosophical arguments and religious doctrines, 156
philosophy as battle of wits for fame and students, 142
philosophy of language, 154–55
Platonic realism, 155
Platonic substructure, 155
reason in matters of faith, 140
Roscelin of Compiègne, 142
rules of primogeniture, 142
Saint Denis, accused of treason regarding, 147
sexual abstinence, 144
*Sic et Non*, 147
Stephen de Garlande, 142, 146–47, 158
*Theologia Christiana*, 147, 158
*Theologia "Summi Boni"* was condemned for heresy, 147
theology, 155–59
Trinity was doctrinally problematic, 147, 157
William of Champeaux, 142–43
women and the church, 153
writing on logic, ethics, and theology, 140–41, 154
younger self, condemned his, 149
*See also* Heloise
Abraham, 18
Achilles, 120, 170, 174, 238, 285, 289
Ackroyd, Peter, 284

Acts of the Apostles, 49–50, 52–54
Adam and Eve, 67, 70, 87–88
Adeodatus (Augustine's son), 68, 75, 79–80
Æthelbert (king of Kent), 118
afterlife, 22
Agamemnon, 170
agnostic, 217, 252
Aimo (Aquinas's eldest son), 211
*akrasia* (failure of will), 78
al-Andalus, 19, 27
Alaric (Visigoth chieftain), 14, 86, 309
Alberic of Rheims, 144
Albert the Great (Albertus Magnus), 212
Albigensian Crusade, 30, 310
Albinus (senator), 96
*Al cor gentil* (Guinizelli), 239
Aleppo, 13
Alexander the Great, 38
Alfonso VI (Spanish emperor), 27
Alfred of Wessex (king), 114, 118–19
Alfred the Great, 23, 168, 284, 310
Alighieri, Dante, 9, 29–30, 34, 310
  Abelard, 144
  afterworld, 231–32
  Aquinas, 209–10
  autobiographical record, 226
  Battle of Campaldino, 228
  Beatrice, 226–27, 229, 235, 241, 244, 247–48, 253, 274
  Beatrice and beyond, 246–49
  birth and family, 225
  Boccaccio, Giovanni, 230–31, 253–56, 262, 273–74, 276–77
  Boethius, 94
  Boniface VIII (pope), 31, 229, 236, 242, 310
  Brunetto, 227, 243
  Cacciaguida, 229–30
  Cangrande della Scala, 229
  canto 11, 210
  catalogue of human life and experience, 224
  Cavalcanti, Guido, 229
  *Commedia*, 114, 209, 222–24, 229–34, 238, 244, 249, 251–52, 254
  condemned to death, 229
  *Convivio*, 230
  Dante the pilgrim, 224, 233, 237, 247–48, 256, 286
  death in Ravenna, 230
  *De Monarchia*, 230
  *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, 230
  *dolce stil nuovo* (“sweet new style”), 225
  Donati, Gemma, 225
  exiled from Florence, 229
  Farinata and Cavalcanti, 240–42
  first circle, 236–38
  Francesca da Rimini, 238

Franciscan preachers in Florence, 227
gates of hell, 235–36
Giovanni Malatesta of Rimini, 238
governing magistrate of Florence, 229
guild for physicians and apothecaries, 229
Guinevere, 182, 184, 186, 189–90, 194, 200, 240
head of the household, 225
heroes of ancient Greece and Rome, 237
human capacity for good and evil, 224
human portraits, 232
*Inferno*, 224, 232, 237–38, 246, 261
itinerant life dependent on charity of friends, 229
"Ladies who have knowledge of love" (*Donne ch'avete intelletto d'amore*), 227
Machiavelli, 228
"New Life" (*Vita Nuova*), 226–28, 239
Old Testament patriarchs, 237
pagan and Christian thought, 223
Paolo and Francesca, 238–40
*Paradise*, 229, 231–32, 246–48
*Paradiso*, 209
poet of the human condition, 224
politics and exile, 228–30
*Purgatory*, 232, 246, 248
purgatory, nine levels in, 232
studied theology, philosophy, and Latin classics, 227, 230
Ugolino, Count, 244–46
Ulysses, 242–44
Virgil, 234–35, 240–41, 244–48
White Guelfs, 230
wife and children in Florence, 229
Alis (Byzantine emperor), 186–87
al-Malik al-Kamil (sultan of Egypt), 204–205
alms, 21, 201, 204, 260
Alypius (Augustine's friend), 79
Ambrose (archbishop), 13, 33, 75–76, 78–79, 84, 309
*amicitia* (friendship), 67, 141
Anderson, William, 223
Angles, 15, 117
Anglo-French War, 30

Anglo-Norman French, 27, 284
Anglo-Saxon(s), 21
kingdoms, 23
landowning elite, 27
language, 33, 116, 118, 284
pagan epics, 119
animal sacrifices, 40, 44
Anselm of Canterbury, 217–18
Anselm of Laon, 143–44
Antiochus the Great, 39
Antipas, Herod, 39
Antipas (son of Herod), 43
antipopes (Avignon), 31

antiquity, late, 12–18
anti-Semitism, 27, 55–56
Apgar, 112
Apollonius of Tyana, 41
Aquinas. *See* Thomas Aquinas, Saint
Aquitaine, 22, 27, 165, 180–81
Arabic numbers, 29
Arab scholars, 19, 24
Aramaic, 39
Archelaus, Herod, 39
Areopagus, 52
Argenteuil abbey, 148
Argenteuil convent, 150
Arian Christians, 13–14, 16, 92
Arianism, 13, 92–93
Arian missionaries, 92
Arians, 13, 53
Aristotle, 19, 24, 29, 92, 154, 213
Ark of the Covenant, 38, 40
*Art of Courtly Love, The* (Capellanus), 34, 181
*Art of Love* (Ovid), 165
Arthur, King
    court of, 166, 182–83, 186–87, 192
    Isle of Avalon, 182, 194
    oral and written accounts of, 181
    *See also* Arthurian
Arthurian
    knighthood, 183
    legend, 181–82
    romances, 28, 162, 180–84, 186, 190, 195, 251
    *See also* Arthur, King
Aslan, Reza, 41
Assyrians, 38
Astrolabe (Abelard's son), 145, 283
Athanasian Creed, 147
Athanasius (bishop of Alexandria), 53
*Aucassin and Nicolette*, 34
Auerbach, Erich, 223–24, 276–77
Augustine of Hippo, Saint, 10, 13–15, 33, 119, 155, 309
    Adam and Eve, 67, 70, 87–88
    *akrasia* (failure of will), 78
    allegorical approach to the scriptures, 84
    Ambrose (archbishop), 75–76, 78–79, 84
    baptism, 66, 73–74, 78–79
    Bishop of Hippo, 64
    childhood, boyhood, and youth, 65–68
    Christian doctrine as abstract matter, 77
    Christianity, conversion to, 77–80
    Christian religion and Latin Bible, 70, 73, 139
    Cicero's *Hortensius*, 69–70, 77
    *City of God, The*, 14, 33, 86–87
    City of Man vs. City of God, 86
    cobishop of Hippo after death of Valerius, 80

common fare of human life, 66
*Confessions*, 9, 33, 63–64, 66, 69, 72–73, 75, 78–81, 85–86, 114
conversion, 77–80
death, 87

Faustus, 73–78
fornication, 68
Genesis, rejected, 71
God
attempting to understand and approach, 81
seeing as outside space and outside time, 82–83
word of is presupposed, 86
holy orders as a priest, 80
*inquietum* (restless longing) of, 64
Jesus, contradictory genealogies of, 70
longing for love and truth, 64
Manichaeans/Manichees, 70–74
heresy of, 71
Manichaeism, 64, 71–74
metaphysics and mythology of, 72, 76–77, 85
memory, miraculous and mysterious, 82–83
mistress, 68, 70, 74–75
monastic community in Thagaste, 80
Monica (mother), 65–66, 68, 71, 73–75, 79–81, 114
mystical vision, 65, 79–80
Neoplatonism, 74–77
pagan wisdom, 69–70
Patrick (father), 64, 66–67
Plato, 69–70, 76–77
Platonic/Christian ideal of a pure mind, 85
Plotinus, 76–77
Porphyry, 76, 92
prodigal son, 67
Rome to teach, 74–75
Saint Paul's epistles, 50, 79
sinful course of youth, 66–67
Virgil and Cicero, 69–70
will concept, 76
Augustus, Philip, 28, 30, 310
Augustus, Romulus (western emperor), 91, 151, 309
Aurelius, Marcus, 263
Averroës (Ibn Rushd), 24, 310
Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā), 24, 211, 310
Avignon (France), 31, 279
Avignon Papacy, 310

Babylonian Captivity, 31
Babylonians, 38, 40
Bailly, Harry, 290–91
Balzac, 232
Barbarossa, Frederick (German emperor), 27, 200, 310
Battle of Adrianople, 14, 309

Battle of Agincourt, 32, 311
Battle of Bouvines, 30
Battle of Campaldino, 228
battle of Christianity against Islam, 167–68, 175, 177
Battle of Collestrada, 200
Battle of Crécy, 32, 311
Battle of Hastings, 27, 310
Battle of Montaperti, 228
Battle of Nicopolis, 32, 311
Battle of Poitiers, 32, 311
Battle of the Milvian Bridge, 12, 86, 309
Battle of Tours, 19, 309
beatific vision, 113–14
*beatitudo* (happiness), 101
Becket. *See* Thomas à Becket
Bede, Venerable (Saint), 33, 118, 136, 309
Belisarius, 17
Bellini, Giovanni, 205
Benedictine
    abbey of Monte Cassino, 211
    monasteries, 21
    monk, 21

Benedict of Monte Cassino, 21
Bennet, Elizabeth, 287
*Beowulf*, 9, 27, 33
    Aeschere, 125–26
    Anglo-Saxons and their Germanic forebears, 117–20
    Anglo-Saxons converted to Christianity, 118
    Beowulf comes to Heorot, 122–23
    biblical references, 116
    Breca, 122, 132
    Cain, 121, 125, 135–36
    Christ, lamb of peace who died on the cross, 115
    Christian allegory of salvation, 115, 135
    Christian poem, 135–38
    dragon, 129–33, 138
    dragon's lair, 130–31, 138
    Ecgtheow, 122
    elegiac epic, 117
    fight with Grendel, 123–25
    Freawaru, 134
    Froda, 134
    Geats, 116, 119, 122, 126–31, 135, 138
    Germanic tribes, 115–17, 133, 136
    Germanic warrior hero, 131–33
    gold-plated cup, 129–30
    Grendel, 121–27, 129–33, 135–36
    Hall of Heorot, 119–21
    heathen poem, 135
    Heatho-Bards, 121, 134
    Hengest, 134
    Heorot, 119–22, 124–27

Hildeburh, 134
honor code, 134
Hrethel, King, 130
Hrothgar, Scyld's great-grandson, 120–36
Hrunting, 126–27
Hygelac, lord of the Geats, 116, 120, 122, 126, 128, 130, 132–33
non-Christian code, 132
Old English, 116
origins, 116, 119
pagan
culture, 115, 135–36
Germania through Christian eyes, 117
heroism, 117
offerings to idols, 136
warrior hero, 114
Patricius, 118
peace weavers, 133–34
revenge of Grendel's dam, 125–28
Scyldings, 157
*Scyld Scefing*, 120, 122, 127, 132, 138
Sigemund, 124
Unferth, 122–23, 126–27, 132
Wealhtheow, 123–24, 133–34
wheel of fortune, 133
Wiglaf, 131, 133
youth and wisdom of age, 129
Berengar (Abelard's father), 141–42
Berenson, Bernard, 116
Bernard (Cistercian abbot of Clairvaux), 156–58
Bible
Cain and Abel, 135
creation of, 135
divine revelations of, 64
flood, the, 135
God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 91
Good Samaritan, 59
heaven rejoices over a sinner who repents, 59
Latin, 70, 73, 139
Sermon on the Mount, 54, 59
*See also* biblical; New Testament; Old Testament

biblical
exegesis, 143, 214
lifespan of seventy years, 233
quotations, 64
*See also* Bible; New Testament; Old Testament
bishop of Ravenna, 92
bishops, 20, 24–25
Blackburn, F. A., 135
Black Death, 31–32, 311
Boccaccio, 256–57
Chaucer, 279, 281, 283
*See also* plague, bubonic

Blacks (in Florence), 229–30
Blancandrin (Marsile's vassal), 168–69, 171
blood libel, 27
blood of Christ, 194
blood ties, 133
Bloom, Harold, 33
Boccaccio, Giovanni, 9, 29, 34, 311
    Alibech, 267
    Ambruogiuolo, 263–64
    *Amorosa Visione*, 251
    Andreuccio, 265
    Bernabò, 263–64
    Black Death, 257, 259
    *brigata* of seven women and three men, 259, 268–69, 271, 274, 276, 280
    Caterina, 270
    Cephalonia, 264
    Christian tries to convert a Jew, 261
    collection of one hundred stories, 251
    Dante, 230–31, 251–56, 261–62, 273–74, 276–77
        *Commedia*, 251–52
        *Inferno*, 261
    death in Florence, 255
    *Decameron*, 251–55, 257, 261–63, 265, 271, 273–77
    Dioneo, 265–66, 270, 272–74
    Dom Felice, 266–67
    Fiammetta, 253, 258
    Filomena, 259
    *Filostrato*, 254, 285
    fortune, 263–65
    Frate Alberto, 266, 269
    Frate Puccio, 266–67
    Ghismunda, 269–70
    Griselda, 272–74, 285, 300–301
    *Griselda*, 285
    Guiscardo, 269–70
    *Il Filostrato*, 285
    *Il Teseida*, 285
    joys of sex, 265–68
    Landolfo, 264–65
    liberality and the social order, 271–74
    life of, 253–55
    love and deception, 269–71
    Madonna Filippa, 268, 300
    man in remote mountain hermitage, 275
    Masetto, 267–68
    Melchisedech, 262
    *Mimesis*, 242, 269
    Mithridanes, 272
    Monna Isabetta, 266
    Nathan, 272
    Pampinea, 258–59, 269
    Petrarch, 252–55, 258, 266, 273
    plague, 258

pope and his clergy, 261
"Prince Galeotto," 251, 268
religion, 260–62
religious characters, 252
*Remedia Amoris*, 256
Ricciardo, 270

Rustico, 267–68
secular literature, 274–77
Ser Cepparello, 260–61, 273–74
sexual desire and material comforts, 262
story of Troilus and Cressida, 254
Tancredi, 269
Voltaire of the fourteenth century, 262
womanhood, morally frail, 273
Zinevra, 263–65
Boccaccino di Chellino (Boccaccio's father), 253–54
Boethius, Anicius Manlius Severinus, 10, 33, 154, 309
Anicii family, 92
Arianism vs. Nicene Creed, 13, 92–93
chain of causation, 108
Christian doctrines, 91
consolation, 94
*Consolation of Philosophy, The*, 33, 89, 91, 93–94, 102–103, 106, 110–15, 149, 233–34, 286
book 1, 94–97
book 2, 97–100
book 3, 100–105
book 4, 104–107
book 5, 107–10
divine providence, 111–13
education in Greek and Latin classics and early Christian works, 92
Fortune, 98–101, 108
free will, 108, 110–11
God
abstract, 91
embodies the highest good, 103
foreknowledge of, 109
happiness, 99–101, 104, 106, 110, 112
highest good, 91, 101–108, 112
human miscalculation, 102
human spirit triumphs over adversity, 114
life and times, 91–94
married Symmachus's daughter Rusticiana, 92
Master of the King's Offices, 93
murdered, 93
philosophy, 95–114
reunion with God in death, 113
rhetoric, 97–98
scholarly pursuits, 93
soul's ascent from darkness, 114
theological treatises, 110
treason and sent to prison, 93

Bolingbroke, Henry, 32, 284
Boniface VIII (pope), 31, 229, 236, 242, 310
Book of Revelation, 53
Boulding, Maria, 63
*brigata* (pleasure seekers), 199
Britain, 15
*Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (Zeffirelli), 198
Brown, Peter, 63
Brutus (Aeneas's great-grandson), 182
Bunyan, John, 94
Buondelmonte dei Buondelmonti, 228
Burgundians, 15, 260
Burgundy, Upper and Lower, 23
Byzantine Empire, 8, 11, 18–20, 26, 311

Cacciaguida, 229–30
Caedmon (illiterate field hand), 118
Caesar, Julius, 33
Caetani (cardinal), 31
Caiaphas (high priest), 45–46
*Calamitous 14th Century, The* (Tuchman), 31
Calixtus II (pope), 25

Calogrenant (knight, Yvain's cousin), 183, 191–92
Cambridge University, 24, 140
Camelot, 182, 188
Cangrande della Scala, 229
Canterbury Cathedral, 25, 290
*Canterbury Tales* (Chaucer), 256, 280, 282–83, 285, 290–92, 294, 298, 302, 304. *See also* Chaucer, Geoffrey
"Canticle of Brother Sun" (Francis of Assisi), 202, 206–207
Capellanus, Andreas (chaplain), 34, 181
Capet, Hugh (Capetian king), 23
*Carmina Burana*, 34, 139–40, 165
Carolingian dynasty, 22–23
Carolingian Renaissance, 22
Carolingian rulers, 23
Carolingians, 22
Carthage, 17, 65, 69–70, 73–74
Cassiodorus, 33, 309
castle of the Fisher King, 194
castles, fortified, 28
*Categories* (Aristotle), 92
Cathedral of Notre-Dame, 139
cathedral school of Notre-Dame, 142–44
cathedral schools, 29
Catholic Church
    Albigensian Crusade, 30, 310
    anti-Semitism, 27
    excommunication and interdiction, 31
    God's kingdom on Earth, 14
    Great Schism, 22, 24

holy, catholic, and apostolic church, 30
institution and source of social stability, 12
investiture powers, 24
Jews
murdered, 26
confined to ghettos and wearing yellow badges, 27
and Muslims slaughtered, 26
papal infallibility, 24, 156
pope's supremacy, 24
Western Schism, 31
*See also* Catholic doctrine; Catholic fathers; Catholicism; Crusade(s); papal
Catholic doctrine, 147–48, 214. *See also* Catholic Church
Catholic fathers, 157. *See also* Catholic Church
Catholicism, 72. *See also* Catholic Church
Cavalcanti, Guido, 225, 229
Cecilia, Saint, 303
Celestine V (king of Naples; pope), 31, 236
celibacy of priesthood, 24
Celtic Brittany, 141
Celtic Mediterranean, 118
Celts, 117
Cerularius, Michael (bishop of Constantinople), 24
Chadwick, Henry, 114
chain of causation, 108
Champain, Cecily, 283
*chanson de geste* (song of heroic deeds), 165–66, 200
*Chanson de Roland*. See *Song of Roland*
*chansons d'aventure et d'amore*, 200
Charlemagne (Holy Roman emperor; king of the Franks), 11, 22–23, 310
*Lancelot* and *Yvain*, 188
*Song of Roland*, 167–80
Charles of Anjou, 228
Charles of Valois (King of France), 229
Charles VII, 32
Charon (mythological boatman), 237
*Charterhouse of Parma, The* (Stendahl), 192

Chaucer, Agnes, 280
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 29, 34, 114
Absolon, 296
Achilles, 285, 289
Arcite, 293–95
Bailly, Harry, 290–91
birth and family, 280–81
Black Death, 281, 283
*Canterbury Tales*, 9, 27, 256, 280, 282–83, 285, 290–92, 294, 298, 302, 304
Cecily Champain, sued for rape by, 283
Clerk's Tale, 285
Constance, 303
death of, 284
Diomede, 285, 288
diplomat, negotiating loans, treaties, and royal marriages, 279
Edward III, valet to, 282–83

Emily, 294–95
England's greatest poet, 279
five-stress line, 279
Franklin's Tale, 302
friar on Fleet Street, 282
General Prologue, 290–92, 295, 302
Henry IV, missions for, 282
Hippolyta, queen, 293–94
Jankin, 299–300
John of Gaunt, 280–84
knight of the shire, 283
Knight's Tale, 192, 285, 293–96
life of, 280–84
life's journey as a pilgrimage, 280
Lollius, 286
marriage group, 300–302
master of the king's works, 283
Miller, the Reeve, and the Cook, 295–98
Miller's Tale, 290, 297
Nicholas, 296
page in Elizabeth's household, 281
Palamon, 293–95
Pandarus, 285, 287–88
Parson, 304–305
Parson's Tale, 304
Philippa de Roet, 282–83
Port of London comptroller of customs, 282
Prioress, 292, 302–303
Prioress's Tale, 302–303
Reeve, 297, 303
Reeve's Tale, 297
religion and retraction, 302–305
Richard II, missions for, 282
*Roman de la Rose*, 284
Shipman's Tale, 301
soldier in Hundred Years' War, 281
St. Paul's Almonry, 281
tale of love, pre-Christian, 289
Thopas, Sir, 291
Troilus, 285–89
*Troilus and Criseyde*, 284–90
Virgin Mother, 299, 303
Westminster Abbey, Poets' Corner at, 284
"What Man Artow?" 290–93
Wife of Bath, 290, 298–300
*See also* Chaucer, Agnes; Chaucer, John; Chaucer, Katherine; Chaucer, Lewis; Chaucer, Robert
Chaucer, John (father), 280–82
Chaucer, Katherine (mother), 280, 282
Chaucer, Lewis (son), 283
Chaucer, Robert (brother), 280
Chesterton, G. K., 198–99, 210–11, 219
chivalry, 28, 181–87, 190–91

chivalric ideals of prowess and courtly love, 186

chivalric romance, 293–94
code of, 28, 182–83, 189, 191, 194
Chrétien de Troyes, 9, 33, 162, 310
*Cligés*, 181, 186
*Erec and Enide*, 184, 190–91
*Lancelot*, 183, 188, 190, 193–94
*Perceval*, 182–83, 194–95, 200
romances, 166, 180, 182–84, 186, 188–90, 195
*Yvain, the Knight of the Lion*, 188
Christ
Arianism vs. Nicene Creed, 13, 92–93
blood of, 194
created by and inferior to God, 92
crucifixion of, 35, 45–48, 71, 235
dual nature of, 22, 36
eternal union in beatitude with, 161
incarnation of, 77, 91, 110, 135, 157–58, 160–61
intercession, 65, 216
Jesus the man could die; Christ the God could not, 47–53
Jews are enemies of, 56
lamb of peace who died on the cross, 115
lesser divinity created by God, 13–14
radical message of, 204
resurrection of, 36, 45, 47–49, 57, 77, 91, 110, 135, 245
single divine nature and not equally God and man, 16
spiritual world messenger, 71
theological construction of a risen Christ, 36
*See also* Jesus
Christ-figure, 168
Christian(s)
allegory, 135
of salvation, 115, 135
church's vision of, 30
communities, 50, 61
divinity, 111
doctrine, 76–77, 135
emperors, 13
empire, 23, 86
Europe, 23, 27
fathers and church councils, 22
feast days, 22, 118
ideal of a pure mind, 85
knights, 32
Latin Bible, 70, 73, 139
logicians, must be, 156
mode of thought, 64
morality, 12
pilgrims, 26
poetry and thought, 118
Roman persecution of, 12
virtue, 137, 158

and pagan philosophers, 158
*See also* Christianity
Christianity
Anglo-Saxons converted to, 118
church fathers were not infallible, 156
church provided ceremony, ritual, and meaning, 21
classical thought, 65
conversion to, 77–80
Council in Rome and Jews confined to ghettos and to wearing yellow badges, 27
Council of Nicaea, 13, 309
Council of Sens, 149
dialectical reasoning to religion, 156
Ecumenical Council, Second, 92
faith, key elements of, 22
growth and rapid spread of, 13
Holy Spirit, 24, 147, 157, 207–208
Jewish origins, divorced from its, 36

Jews and Muslims slaughtered, 26
Jews of the Diaspora, 36, 38
Judaic faith, radical departure from, 18
Latin Bible, 70, 73, 139
Latin of the church, 21, 24, 26
Nicene Creed, 13, 53, 92–93
Old Testament, 18, 37
orthodox Nicene, 92
pagan customs, festivals, and traditions, 22, 136
Paul absolved Gentiles of the requirements of the Jewish faith, 36
Paul divorced Christ's message from the laws of the Hebrew scriptures, 36
Paul's message of Christ to Gentiles with a change in focus, 51–53
practices, regularized its, 53
purification of the soul; knowledge of God; and one's place in the universe, 70
scriptural revelations, 156
spiritual foundations of, 42
Trinity was doctrinally problematic, 147
*See also* Bible; Christian(s); Crusade(s); Jesus; kingdom(s)
*Chronicles* (Froissart), 34
chronology of events and people, 309–11
church doctrines, 28, 156, 160, 206, 214
*Church History* (Eusebius), 118
church music, 24, 139
Cicero (Roman poet), 29, 86, 93, 140–41
*Hortensius*, 69–70, 77
circumcision, 36, 51–52
Cistercian abbey at Fossanova, 222
*City of God, The* (Augustine), 14, 33, 86–87
city-states, 9, 28, 228
Clairvaux abbey, 162
Clare (Assisi nobleman's daughter), 204
classical works, 33, 87
*Cligés* (Chrétien de Troyes), 181, 186
clock, mechanical, 29

Clovis (king of the Franks), 15, 93, 309
Cluny monastery, 158
code, honor. *See* honor code
code of chivalry. *See* chivalry, code of
code of honor. *See* honor code
*Commedia* (Dante), 31, 209, 222–24, 229–34, 238, 244, 249
Common Era, 53
Concordat of Worms, 25, 310
*Confessions* (Augustine), 9, 33, 63–64, 66, 69, 72–73, 75, 78–81, 85–86, 114
*Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, A* (Twain), 28
*Consolation of Philosophy, The* (Boethius), 33, 89, 91, 93–94, 110–15, 149, 233–34, 286
Constantine (emperor), 12–13, 16, 53, 309
    conversion of, 12, 309
    Donation of, 22, 24
Constantinople, 14, 18–19, 26, 310
*Convivio* (Dante), 230
cosmic belonging, 64
cosmic drama, 64
cotton fabric, 29
Council in Rome, Fourth Lateran, 27
Council of Constance, 31
Council of Nicaea, 13, 309
Council of Sens, 149, 158, 180
court of King Arthur, 166, 182–83, 186–87, 192. *See also* Arthur, King
courtly love (*l'amour courtois*), 166, 180–81, 183, 186, 190, 192, 200, 228
creation song, 136

crucifixion, 77, 195. *See also* Christ, crucifixion of
Crusade(s)
    Albigensian, 30, 310
    anti-Semitism and pogroms, 27
    Battle of Nicopolis, 32
    Crusader states in Holy Land, 26
    First, 11, 26, 167, 310
    Fourth, 26
    Fifth, 204
    Sixth, 32, 211
    Urban II (pope), 26
    *See also* Christianity

Dante. *See* Alighieri, Dante
Dark Ages in Europe, 11, 18–23, 33, 62
David, King, 35–36, 38
    kingdom of, 41
Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), 40
day of judgment, 35, 43–44, 47, 50, 135, 240
*Decameron* (Boccaccio), 251–55, 257, 261–63, 265, 271, 273–77
de Cerchis (Guelf family), 229
*De Monarchia* (Dante), 230
Denis, Saint (patron saint of France), 147
*deus ex machina*, 113

*De Vulgari Eloquentia* (Dante), 230
dialectical disputes, 154
dialectical reasoning and religion, 156
Diaspora of Jews, 36, 38–39, 50
Díaz de Vivar, Rodrigo (El Cid), 27, 310
*Dictatus Papae*, 24, 31
dietary restrictions, 36, 44, 51–52, 205
Diocletian (Roman emperor), 12, 14
divine
    assistance, 102
    grace, 108
    intelligence, 107, 112
    plan, 97, 104, 107–108, 159, 228
    providence, 111–13, 159, 252, 263–65, 276, 286
    right of kings, 32
    sanction, 25
doctrine
    Catholic, 147–48, 214
    Christian, 76–77, 135
    church, 28, 156, 160
    Manichaean, 72–73
    papal infallibility, 24, 156
Domesday Book, 27, 310
Dominican friars, 30, 212. *See also* Dominicans
Dominicans, 212–14, 227. *See also* Dominican friars
Dominic of Spain, Saint, 30, 212, 310
Domitian, 38
Donati, Corso, 229
Donati, Gemma, 225
Donation of Constantine, 22, 24
Donatis (Guelf family), 13, 228–29
Dostoevsky, Fyodor, 61
Dryden, John, 279

Eastern Orthodox Church, 22, 24, 26
*Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Bede), 118
Eckhart, Meister, 29
Ecumenical Council, Second, 92
Edict of Milan, 13
Edward of Woodstock (Black Prince), 283
Edward III (king of England), 281–84
Ehrman, Bart, 41
Eleanor (granddaughter of William IX), 180–81
Eleanor of Aquitaine, 27–29
Eliot, T. S., 223, 232
Elizabeth (Duchess of Clarence), 281

Enide, 184–87, 190
epic poetry, 10, 22, 168
Erec (son of King Lac), 184–87
*Erec and Enide* (Chrétien de Troyes), 184, 190–91
Europe

Aristotle's natural philosophy, 213
cathedral schools and universities, 87
Christianity, rise of, 35
church's vision of a Christian, 30
classical learning and scholarship, 139
Dark Ages in, 18–23, 33, 62
Franciscans, 198
Germanic ancestors, 119
Latin language, 165
paganism, 86–87
plague, bubonic, 257
rise of, 23–28
Roman law, 29
Visigoths, Vandals, Franks, and Lombards, 117
western European kingdoms, 19
Eusebius, 118
*Euthyphro* (Plato), 159
Everyman, 63
Excalibur (sword), 182
Exodus, 38

Fatima (Muhammad's daughter), 19
Faustus (Manichaean bishop), 73, 78
Fenice, 186–88
feudalism, 32, 279, 283
Fifth Crusade, 204
*Filostrato* (Boccaccio), 254, 285
fin'amors (refined love), 165, 180
Finley, M. I., 115
1 Corinthians 4, 61
First Crusade, 11, 26, 167, 310
Flood, Emmet, 81
Florence (Italy), 9, 228, 230, 241, 252–55, 257–59. *See also* Florentine
Florentine
families, 225
merchant banking, 253
nobility, 229, 254
politics, 241
*See also* Florence (Italy)
*foederati* (German tribes), 91
Fourth Crusade, 26
Francesca da Rimini, 238
Francis of Assisi, Saint, 9, 30, 34, 187, 310
al-Kamil, al-Malik (sultan of Egypt), 204–205
austere life of the monk, 204
birth and family, 199
*brigata* (pleasure seekers), 199
"Canticle of Brother Sun," 202, 206–207
cauterized his left eye with fire, 206
cave hermitage on mountain of La Verna, 205
Christ
emotional connection with, 197

figure, 198
radical message of, 204
was like St. Francis, 199
church of San Damiano, 201
Church of St. Mary of the Angels, 202
death and burial, 206
deeds of arms and courtly love, 200
determination and charisma, 199
devotion to poverty and union with God, 209
dietary and fasting restrictions, 205
Fifth Crusade to the Holy Land, 204
fought in the service of the pope, 200
Francesco, nicknamed, 199
Friars Minor, 198, 203–205
Giovanni di Pietro di Bernardone, 199

Guido of Assisi (bishop), 202
*jongleur de Dieu*, 202
knight, ambitions as a, 200
Leo, Brother, 209
lepers, fear of, 201
Lesser Brothers, 203
life of, 199–206
life of a penitent, 202
malaria and glaucoma, 205
man vs. myth, 198
mendicant friar, 197
new fool (*novellus pazzus*), 203
patron saint of ecology, 202
penance, fasting, and prayer, 205
Pietro, 201
pilgrimage to Rome and tomb of Saint Peter, 201
Poverello, 199, 206
purity and deep compassion, 199
remorse over dismissing a beggar, 201
"Rules" for his order, 207
stigmata, 198, 205, 221
wolf of Gubbio, 202
writings of, 206–209
*See also* Franciscans
Franciscans, 198, 208, 212
Franks, 15, 23
Freawaru (Hrothgar's daughter), 134
Frederick II (Holy Roman emperor), 211, 213, 228
freeholders, 15
free will, 77, 108, 110–11, 236, 286, 289
French cardinals, 31
French courtly romances, 284, 286
Friars Minor, Order of, 198, 203–205
Froda (Ingeld's father), 134
Froissart, Jean, 34, 311
Fulbert (Cathedral of Notre-Dame canon), 144–46, 150–51

Gabriel (archangel), 18, 55
Galeotto (Prince), 251, 268
Galilee, 39, 42–44, 48–49
Gallo-Romans, 15
Ganelon (Roland's stepfather), 169–73, 178–80, 244
Gaul, 14–15, 33, 91, 118
Gawain (lord, Arthur's nephew), 182–84, 188–95
Genesis, 71
Geoffrey of Monmouth, 181–83
*Germania* (Tacitus), 115
Germanic tribes, 13–14, 115–17, 133, 136

German monarchy, 23
German nobles, 25
Ghibellines, 28, 200, 228, 241–42, 244
Gibbon, Edward, 86
Giovanni Malatesta of Rimini, 238
gnostic heresy, 30
Gnosticism, 71. *See also* Gnostics
Gnostics, 42, 53, 57. *See also* Gnosticism
God
of Abraham, 91
of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, 53
abstract, 91
bound by ethics, 159
cannot do evil, 159
chosen people of, 37–41
of Christianity, 52–53
created the world, 155
embodies the highest good, 103
embodiment of perfect goodness, 159
foreknowledge of, 109
of the Hebrew scriptures, 52
metaphysical substructure created by, 155
orders the universe, 159
outside space and outside time, 82–83
providence of, 135–37

reunion with God in death, 113
understanding and approaching, 81
word of is presupposed, 86
Goethe, 9, 63
Golden Horn, 19
Goldsmith, Margaret, 135–36
Goliath, 38
Good Samaritan, 59
Gothic architecture, 139
Gothic Wars, 17–18, 309
Goths, 86
Gottfried von Strassburg, 34, 186
Grail Quest of Perceval, 194
Great Chain of Being, 76
Great Famine, 31
Great Schism, 22, 24, 310
Greek Church, 24, 26
Gregorian reforms, 26
Gregory of Tours, 33, 309
Gregory the Great (pope), 21–22, 33, 118, 136, 309
Gregory VII (pope), 24–25, 310
Gregory IX (pope), 30, 310
Gregory XI (pope), 31
Guelfs (allegiance to the pope), 28, 200, 228–30, 241, 244
Guido of Assisi (bishop), 202
Guillaume de Lorris, 34
Guillaume de Machaut, 139

Guinevere (King Arthur's wife), 182, 184, 186, 189–90, 194, 200, 240, 251
Guinizelli, Guido, 225, 239

Hagia Sophia (Istanbul), 16
Hasmonean heirs, 39
Heaney, Seamus, 116
Heatho-Bards, 121, 134
Hebrew scriptures, 38–39, 46, 55
Hellenic philosophers, 57
Hellenistic period, 39
Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora, 36, 50
Hellespont, 26
Heloise
  Abelard
    buried beside, 163
    confession of faith of, 158–59
    falsified and betrayed their relationship, 150
    as her guardian, 150
    letters and songs from, 150, 152, 162
    letters to, 152–53, 162
    love for, 140, 151
    pressed her to take vows as a nun, 146
    and religious instruction, 152
    teachings on logic, 140–41
  Abelard's *Historia*, read, 150
  Astrolabe (son), 145
  austerities of the cloister, 151
  bride of Christ vs. bride of Abelard, 153
  chaste and devout, 153
  Christianity, place of women in, 153
  convent at Argenteuil, 150
  Council of Sens, 149
  desires, no regrets about former, 152
  Fulbert (Cathedral of Notre-Dame canon), 144–45, 151
  gap between physical intimacy and emotional and spiritual union, 141
  love
    idealized conception of, 141
    of God vs. love for another person, 161
    was no sin, 149
  marriage, opposed, 145
  married Abelard in a private ceremony, 146

  Paraclete (hermitage), 148–50
  passion for physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual union, 149
  Père Lachaise cemetery, 163
  pleasures of the flesh, enjoyed, 151
  prioress of Saint-Denis, 148
  Rule for the Paraclete, 153
  Rule of Saint Benedict, 153
  scholar of language, ethics, and theology, 150
  scholar of Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, 140, 150
  sister in Christ, 161

*See also* Abelard, Peter
Henry (Duke of Normandy), 180
Henry II (king of England), 25, 27–28, 180–81, 310
Henry IV (German emperor), 11, 25
Henry IV (king of England), 32, 279, 282, 284
Henry V (German emperor), 25
Henry V (king of England), 32
Heraclius, 18
Herodias, 43
Herodotus, 182
Herod the Great, 39, 55
*hijrah* (flight), 19
Hildeburh (Danish princess), 134
Hippo (North Africa), 9
*Historia* (Abelard), 148–50, 161–62
*Historical Figure of Jesus, The* (Sanders), 41
*History of the Franks* (Gregory of Tours), 33, 309
*History of the Kings of Britain* (Geoffrey of Monmouth), 181
*History of the Wars* (Procopius), 17
*Hobbit, The* (Tolkien), 115
Holy Land, 26, 55–56
Holy of Holies, 38, 40
Holy Spirit, 24, 147, 157, 207–208
Homer, 9, 136–37
*Iliad*, 120, 167, 170, 174, 194
*Odyssey*, 64, 115–16, 120, 194, 243
honor code, 134. *See also* chivalry, code of
Honorius (Roman western emperor), 14
*Hortensius* (Cicero), 69–70, 77
House of Bardi, 253, 282
Howard, Donald, 277
Hrethel, King, 130
Hrothgar (Scyld's great-grandson), 120–36
human affairs, 108, 264, 293
humanist tradition, 114
human reason, 108, 156, 216
human suffering, 159
Hundred Years' War, 32, 279, 311
hypocrisy, 155, 261–62, 266, 268, 302

Iago, 169
ice age, mini, 15
*Idiot, The* (Dostoevsky), 61
*Idylls of the King* (Tennyson), 182
*Il Filostrato* (Boccaccio), 285
*Iliad* (Homer), 120, 167, 170, 174, 194
*Il Teseida* (Boccaccio), 285
incarnation of Christ, 77, 91, 110, 135, 157–58, 160–61
*Inferno* (Dante), 224, 232, 237–38, 246, 261
Innocent II, (pope), 158
Innocent III (pope), 30, 203–204
Innocent VI (pope), 255

*inquietum* (restless longing) of Augustine, 64
intercession, 65, 147, 216
Investiture Conflict, 25, 310
Irish monasteries, 21
Isaac, 18
Isaiah, 48

Islam, 18–19. *See also* Muslim(s)
Islamic Spain, 19
Isle of Avalon, 182, 194
Israel, nation of, 41

Jacob, 18
Jaeger, Werner, 52–53, 64
James the Just (Jesus's brother), 42, 50
Jean de Meun, 34, 162
Jerome, Saint, 13, 33, 309
    Vulgate of, 21, 33, 139
Jerusalem
    crusaders plundered, 26
    Muslims reconquered, 26, 310
    Romans destroyed the Temple, 36
Jesus
    accounts of his life events were changed based on theology vs. actual history, 37
    apocalyptic vision of John the Baptist, 35, 43–44, 47
    Aramaic, preached in, 37, 41
    behavior in the Temple and courtyard of the Gentiles, 45
    birth and family, 42
    commandments: love of God and love of neighbor, 44, 58
    crucifixion and resurrection, 45–47
    crucifixion of the Messiah, 35–36
    genealogies, contradictory, 70
    genealogy to King David, 55
    God of the Hebrew scriptures, 52
    God's chosen messenger, 46
    God's last messenger before day of judgment, 35
    Good Samaritan, 59
    historical, 41–47
    "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," 46
    Jesus the man could die; Christ the God could not, 47–53
    Jewish
        disciples adapted his words, 35–36
        kingdom, prophecy of the coming, 44
        liberation movement of Jesus, became anti-Semitic under Paul, 37
        prophet, 35
    Jews of the Diaspora, disciples spread the words and deeds of Jesus to, 36
    John the Baptist, 35, 43–44
    King of the Jews, 35
    Last Supper, 46, 57, 155
    life and teachings, various versions of his, 53
    love is not measured and portioned like property, 59

Magdalene, Mary, 47, 49, 55
Messiah, 35–36, 40–41
miracles, 41, 44, 57, 135, 198, 260, 296
moral teachings, 57–62
Paul, Saint, 36, 48, 50–54, 61–62, 94
political message removed from New Testament gospels, 37
preached repentance of sins and fulfillment of Hebrew scriptures, 35
prodigal son, 58, 64, 67, 97
religious observance, morality vs. ritual, 58
resurrection and reinterpretations of Jesus and his message, 36, 47–48
Rome, threat to, 45, 56
Saul of Tarsus, 36
scriptures, Jesus came to fulfill vs. challenge the, 36, 44
Sermon on the Mount, 54, 59
son of Mary and Joseph, 42, 44
Temple in Jerusalem disturbance, 35

twelve disciples symbolic of twelve tribes of Israel, 44
written accounts of, no contemporary, 41
*See also* Christ; Christianity; Jew(s)
*Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Ehrman), 41
Jew(s)
Ark of the Covenant, 38, 40
circumcision, sacrifice, dietary restrictions, 51–52
Council in Rome and Jews confined to ghettos and to wearing yellow badges, 27
David, King, 35–36, 38
Diaspora, of the, 35–36, 38–39, 50
dietary restrictions, 36, 44, 51–52, 205
eleventh century, 19
French and Italian knights murdered, 26
Holy of Holies, 38, 40
Messiah, 35–36, 40–41
messianic tradition, 40
of Palestine, 40–41
sacrificed Christian children, 27
Temple in Jerusalem, 35, 38, 40, 45, 56
Torah, 38, 40, 43
tribes of Israel, 38, 40, 44
Yom Kippur, 40
*See also* anti-Semitism; Crusade(s); Jesus; Jewish; Old Testament; Paul, Saint
Jewish
communities, 39
kingdom, 35, 40, 44, 46
laws, traditional, 51–52
prophet, 35 (*see also* Jesus)
revolt, 55
*See also* Jew(s)
*Jewish Antiquities* (Josephus), 38
*Jewish War, The* (Josephus), 38
*jihad* against infidels, 19. *See also* Muhammad
Joan of Arc, 32, 311
Job, Book of, 107, 110

Johannes de Vepria (monk), 162
John, Gospel of, 49, 54–57. *See also* Synoptic Gospels
John (king of England), 30
John of Gaunt (Duke of Lancaster), 280–84
John the Baptist, 35, 43–44
John I (pope), 93–94
Johnson, Samuel, 89
*jongleur de Dieu*, 202, 204. See also *jongleurs (wandering singers)*
*jongleurs* (wandering singers), 166, 200. See also *jongleur de Dieu*
Joseph (Jesus's brother), 42
Joseph of Arimathea, 47
Josephus, Flavius (Jewish historian), 37–38, 41
Joyce, James, 111
joys of sex, 265–68
Judah, 38
Judaism, 18, 51
Judas (Jesus's brother), 42, 46, 179
Judea, 39, 43
Julian the Apostate, 13, 309
Justin I (eastern emperor), 93
Justinian the Great, 12, 16–18, 93, 309
Jutes, 117, 134

Kant, Immanuel, 103, 109
Kaske, R. E., 132
Kay (Gawain's seneschal), 182–83, 189, 191–92
Kazantzakis, Nikos, 198

kingdom(s)
    Anglo-Saxon, 23
    of David, 41
    on Earth, 45
    of God, 14, 37, 43–45, 47, 49–50, 58, 62
    of heaven, 36
    Jewish, 35, 40, 44, 46
    *See also* Christianity
Knight of the Cart, 189
knights, French and Italian, 26. *See also* Crusade(s)
Knights of the Round Table, 182, 186. *See also* court of King Arthur
knights on horseback, 28
*koinē* Greek, 39
Könsgen, Ewald, 162
Koran. *See* Qur'an

*laisse* (verse or stanza), 168, 173
*Lancelot* (Chrétien de Troyes), 183, 188, 190, 193–94
Lancelot (knight), 183, 186, 188–90, 193–94, 200, 240
Langland, William, 34, 311
Latin
    Bible, 70, 73, 139 (*see also* Vulgate of Saint Jerome)
    Church, 21, 24, 26

classics, 92
confession of sins, 63
language, 21, 65, 118, 139, 142, 150–51
learning, 119
letters, anthology of, 162
literature, 23, 139
literature, law, and rhetoric, 69
poetic styles, 90
prose, 150, 162
secular verse, 139
translations, 119, 139, 161
"Latin Quarter" of Paris, 142
Laudine (wife of Esclados), 192–94
*Laws* (Æthelbert), 118
Leo (brother), 209
Leoninus (musician), 139
Leo III (pope), 23
Leo IX (pope), 24, 310
Leo XIII (pope), 215
*Letters of Abelard and Heloise* (Könsgen), 162
Letter to the Galatians, 61
Letter to the Romans, 61
Levite (Jewish tribe of Levi), 59
Lewis, C. S., 223
*Life of Jesus* (Renan), 41
Lindisfarne monastery, 118. *See also* Lindisfarne monks
Lindisfarne monks, 136. *See also* Lindisfarne monastery
Lionel (son of King Edward III), 281
literacy, 20, 33, 42
literature, twelfth-century, 168
logos (word of God), 4
Lombards, 18, 22, 117
Lombardy, kingdom of, 22, 28
Long Peace, 30, 310
*Lord of the Rings, The* (Tolkien), 115
*Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard, The* (Mews), 162–63
lost tribes of Israel, 40
Lotulf of Lombardy, 144, 147
Louis of France (prince), 180
Louis VI (king of France), 158
Louis VII (king of France), 27–28, 158, 180–81, 310
Louis IX (king of France), 214
love
of God and love of neighbor, 44, 58
is not measured and portioned like property, 59
our enemies, 60
poems/poetry, 28, 34, 139, 140, 165
songs, 29, 140, 145, 165
of wisdom, 69, 111
Lucan, 146–47
Luke, Gospel of, 43, 48–49, 54–56, 58–60, 148, 203
Lunette (Laudine's lady in waiting), 192–93

lyric poetry, 10, 34

Maccabees, 39
Mackey, Louis, 10, 83–84, 86
*Madame Bovary* (Flaubert), 194
Madaura, 65, 67
Magdalene, Mary, 47, 49, 55
Magna Carta, 30, 310
Maimonides, Moses (Jewish scholar), 211
malnutrition, 11, 20
Manchester, William, 11
Mani (Persian thinker), 71–72
Manichaean(s)/Manichees, 13, 71, 72–74
    bishop, 73
    doctrine, 72–73
    heresy, 71
    metaphysics and mythology, 72, 76–77, 85
    patrons, 74
Manichaeism, 64, 71–74
Manichees. *See* Manichaean(s)/Manichees
*Man without Qualities, The* (Musil), 194
Marenbon, John, 110–11, 155
Marie de Champagne (Countess), 181
Mark, Gospel of, 43, 45, 48, 54–57, 203
marriage bond, 119
Marsile (Saracen king), 168–71, 173, 175, 177
Martel, Charles, 11, 19, 22
Marx, 60
Masada, 56
Matthew, D. J. A., 9
Matthew, Gospel of, 43, 48, 51, 54–56, 59–60, 203
Mecca, 18–19
medieval
    courtly romance, 294, 298
    education, 33, 154
    romance and literature, 26
    tail-rhyme romances, 291
Meleagant, 189–90
mendicant friars, 28, 30. *See also* mendicant tradition
mendicant tradition, 213. *See also* mendicant friars
Menippean satire, 111
Menippus of Gadara, 111
Merlin (magician), 182
Merovich (Clovis's grandfather), 15
Merovingian
    dynasty, 22
    kingdom, 15
    kings, 22
*Messe de Nostre Dame, La* (polyphonic mass), 139
Messiah, 35–36, 40–41
messianic tradition, 40
Mews, Constant, 162–63

Michaelmas, 168–69
Middle Ages, 9–13, 23, 140, 162
    early, 33, 117
    High, 139, 162
    late, 28–32
Milan Cathedral, 75
military service, 20
Milton, 284–85
miracles, 41, 44, 57, 135, 198, 260, 296
modernity, 140
monastic learning, 136
monastic life, 21, 67, 140
money changers, 40, 45

Monica (Augustine's mother), 65–66, 68, 71, 73–75, 79–81, 114
monks, 21, 24
Monophysites, 13, 16
Montaigne, 63
Monte Cassino, 21, 211–12
Montessori method, 67
Mont-Sainte-Geneviève, 143
*Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (film), 28, 182–83
moral law, 109
Mordred (Arthur's nephew), 182
Moses, Five Books of, 38
Moses on Mount Sinai, 38
Mount Sinai, 38, 43
Muhammad (prophet), 18–19, 309
muses, 95, 120, 153, 275–77
Muses in Parnassus, 275
museum artifact, 162
musical handmaiden, 97
Muslim(s), 18–19, 22, 27, 148
mystery cults, 13

Nag Hammadi (town), 53
Naimes (Duke), 169–70, 177
Naples, kingdom of, 28, 253
Neoplatonism, 33, 64, 74–77, 213
Nero, 60–62
New Testament
    Acts of the Apostles, 49–50, 52–54
    anti-Semitism, 27, 55–56
    1 Corinthians 4, 61
    Galatians, Letter to the, 61
    God-Man is antithetical to traditional Jewish religion, 37
    gospels were written in Greek thirty to seventy years after Jesus's death, 33, 37, 41, 65, 309
    Jesus, historical vs. theological, 41
    Jews are the enemies of Christ, 56
    John, Gospel of, 49, 54–57
    John the Baptist, 35, 43–44

Luke, Gospel of, 43, 48–49, 54–56, 58–60, 148, 203
Mark, Gospel of, 43, 45, 48, 54–57, 203
Matthew, Gospel of, 43, 48, 51, 54–56, 59–60, 203
Paul
epistles of, 50, 79
letters of, 61–62
Saint, 36, 48, 50–54, 94
personal salvation, 110
"Q" document, 54
Romans, Letter to the, 61
Synoptic Gospels, 54, 57
*See also* Bible; Christ; Jesus; Old Testament
*Nibelungenlied*, 29, 34
Nicene Creed, 13, 53, 92–93, 309
Nicopolis, Battle of, 32, 279, 311
Nietzsche, Friedrich, 98
Noah's flood, 43
nominalism, 143, 154–55
Norman Conquest, 284
Normandy, 30
Norman French, 27
Notre-Dame, Cathedral of, 139
Notre-Dame, cathedral school of, 142–44

O'Connor, Flannery, 214
Odoacer (Germanic tribal leader), 16, 91–92, 309
Odysseus, 41, 132
*Odyssey* (Homer), 64, 115–16, 120, 194, 243
Old English, 27, 33, 116, 118–19, 284
Old Testament, 18, 37, 43, 53
Adam and Eve, original sin of, 67, 157
Exodus, 38
Genesis, 71
Hebrew scriptures, 38–39, 46, 55, 65
Job, Book of, 107, 110
Moses, Five Books of, 38
Moses on Mount Sinai, 38
Pentateuch, 38
Proverbs, 149
Ten Commandments, 38
*See also* Bible; Jew(s); New Testament
Oliphant (Roland's horn), 172–73, 176–77
Oliver, Count, 170–78, 180, 200
*Once and Future King, The* (White), 182
opium of the people, 60
Order of the Friars Minor, 203
original sin, 67, 157–58
Orléans, English siege of, 32
Ostrogoth(s), 15, 17, 92
advisors, 63
dynasty, 18

Othello, 169
Ottoman Turks, 26
Ottonian dynasty, 23
Otto I (Holy Roman Emperor), 23
Ovid, 143, 165
    love poetry of, , 139, 141
Oxford University, 24, 140

pagan
    antiquity, 117
    culture, 115, 135–36
    customs, festivals, and traditions, 22, 136
    epics, Anglo-Saxon, 119
    Germania, 117
    heroism, 117
    offerings to idols, 136
    philosophers, 150, 157–58, 210
    philosophy, 70, 108, 216
    rituals, 13
    thought, Christian and pagan, 223
    virtues, 137
    warrior hero, 114
    wisdom, 69–70
    *See also* paganism
paganism, 13. *See also* pagan
Palestine, 38–41, 46, 262
Palestrina, 139
Pampinea, 258–59, 269
papal
    ambitions, 22
    apartments in Naples, 31
    authority, 21
    doctrine, infallibility of, 24, 156
    head of the church, 24
    inquisition, 30
    legation for excommunication, 24
    letters of protection, 205
    pronouncements, 21
    supremacy, 24
        asserted in *Dictatus Papae*, 31
Papal States, 22–23, 28
Paraclete (hermitage), 148–50. *See also* Paraclete library
Paraclete library, 162. *See also* Paraclete (hermitage)
*Paradise* (Dante), 209, 229, 231–32, 246–48
*Paradise Lost* (Milton), 284–85
parish priests, 20, 24
Parnassus, Mount, 276
*Parzival* (von Eschenbach), 29, 34
Passover, 40, 44–45
Patrick, Saint, 21
Patrick (Augustine's father), 64, 66–67
patronage power, 25

Paul, Saint, 36, 48, 50–54, 61–62, 79, 94

Pearsall, Derek, 296, 303
Peasants' Revolt, 32, 279, 283, 311
Pelagians, 13
Pentateuch, 38
Perceval (knight), 183, 188, 194–95, 200
Père Lachaise Cemetery, 163
Perea, 39
Perrers, Alice, 283
Persian Empire, 38. *See also* Persians
Persians, 17–19, 38. *See also* Persian Empire; Persian War
Persian War, 18. *See also* Persians
personal salvation, 110
Perugia, 199–200, 204, 209, 265
Peter, Saint, 23, 51, 201
Peter of Cataneo (vicar), 205
Peter the Hermit (pope), 26, 30–31
Peter the Venerable (abbot of Cluny), 158
Petrarch, 9, 31, 34, 117, 162, 310
    Boccaccio, Giovanni, 252–55, 258, 266, 273
    Laura, 253, 258
*Phaedo* (Plato), 95, 113
*Pharsalia* (Lucan), 146–47
Philippa de Roet, 282–83
Philip IV (king of France), 31
Philistines, 38
*philo-sophia*, 111
*Piers Plowman* (Langland), 34
Pietro (father of Francis), 201
Pietro da Morrone (pope), 26, 30–31
Pilate, Pontius (Roman prefect), 35, 39, 45–47, 56
*Pilgrim's Progress, The* (Bunyan), 94
Pippin III (Merovingian king), 22, 309
plague, bubonic
    in Athens, 258
    Boccaccio's description of, 257–58
    Chaucer, 279
    eastern empire, 17
    Europe, 257
    Florence, 252, 258–59, 269, 274
    London, 281
    *See also* Black Death
plainchant, 24, 139
Plantagenet kings, 25, 32
Plato, 76, 86, 92, 97
    Academy in Athens, 114
    *Euthyphro*, 159
    *Phaedo*, 95, 113
    *Republic*, 60, 94–95
    *Timaeus*, 102–103, 110
    *See also* Platonic; Platonic Academy; Platonic Dialogues
Platonic

realism, 154–55
substructure, 155
symbolism, 94
*See also* Plato; Platonic Academy; Platonic Dialogues
Platonic Academy, 16. *See also* Plato
Platonic Dialogues, 94. *See also* Plato
Plautus, 236
Plotinus (Egyptian Greek), 33, 76–77, 309
*Poem of the Cid, The* (*El Cantar de mio Cid*), 27, 34
"Poet of the Secular World" (Auerbach), 223
pogroms, 27. *See also* anti-Semitism
Polo, Marco, 29
polyphony, 139
Pompey the Great, 39
Ponte Vecchio, 228
Poor Sisters, 198
Poor Sisters of San Damiano, 204
Pope, Alexander, 163
*Pope Marcellus Mass* (Palestrina), 139
*popolo* (merchant class), 199
Porphyry, 76, 92, 139, 154

Portinari, Beatrice, 225
Portinari, Folco, 225
Port of London, 282
Priam of Troy (king), 285
primogeniture, rules of, 142
"Prince Galeotto" (Boccaccio), 251, 268
Procopius, 17, 309
prodigal son, 58, 64, 67, 97
Proust, Marcel, 94
Proverbs, 149
Punic (language), 65
*Purgatory* (Dante), 232, 246, 248

Quadrivium, 29, 33
*Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Schweitzer), 41
Qur'an, 18

*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 40
rational beings, 109
Ravenna, 15, 17, 22, 92–93
bishop of, 92
realistic fiction, 29
Rebhorn, Wayne, 271
Reconquista of Spain, 27
religious belief, 10
Relihan, Joel, 110–11, 113–14
*Remedia Amoris* (Boccaccio), 256
Renaissance
of classical learning, 162

period, 16, 24, 28, 65, 117, 139, 249
scholars, 11, 231
Renan, Ernest, 41
*Republic* (Plato), 60, 94–95
restrictions
dietary, 36, 44, 51–52, 205
Sabbath, 44
resurrection of Christ, 36, 45, 47–49, 57, 77, 91, 110, 135, 245
*Return of Martin Guerre, The* (film), 20
revenge killing, 137
Rhine River, 14–15
rhyming couplets, eight-syllable, 166
Richard the Lionheart (Duke of Aquitaine), 28, 181
Richard II (king of England), 32, 279, 282–84
ritual(s)
church, 21
cleansing, 40
compliance, 40
pagan, 13, 52
priestly, 45, 57–58
purification, 45
Roccasecca castle, 211
Roland (Charlemagne's vassal), 167–71
Roman
civil government, 18
deities, ancient, 86
Empire, 12, 18
law, 15–16, 29
occupation, 41
philosophers, 139
poets, historians, and philosophers, 24
protectorate, 39
road network, 20
Senate, 16, 20
*See also* Rome
romance(s)
of adventure (*roman d'aventure*), 29, 166–67
Arthurian, 162, 180–84, 186, 190, 195, 251
chivalric, 293
Chrétien, 166, 180, 182–84, 186, 188–90, 195
early, 184–88
French courtly, 284, 286
language, 166
medieval courtly, 294, 298
medieval tail-rhyme, 291
*Romance of the Rose* (Guillaume de Lorris), 34
*Romance of the Rose* (Jean de Meun), 162
*roman d'aventure* (romance of adventure), 29, 166–67
*Roman de Brut* (Wace), 182
*Roman d'Eneas, Le*, 181
*Roman de Tristan* (Thomas of Britain), 186
*Roman de Troie, Le*, 181

Roman Empire. *See under* Roman
Romanianus, 65, 69
Rome
    collapse of, 15
    Justinian the Great, 12, 16–17
    papacy control over, 22
    *See also* Roman
Romulus Augustus, 16, 92
Roscelin of Compiègne, 142
Rousseau, 63
Rule for the Paraclete, 153
Rule of Saint Benedict, 21, 153, 309
Ruskin, John, 223
Rusticiana (Symmachus's daughter), 92

Sabbath restrictions, 44
sacrifice(s), 51
    animal, 44
    to God, 40
    pagan, 52
    priestly rituals and, 57–58
Saint-Denis monastery, 147
Saint-Gildas-de-Rhuys monastery, 148
Saint-Médard, abbey of, 147
Salome (Herodias's daughter), 43
Samaritan, 59
San Damiano, church of, 201, 204
Sanders, E. P., 41, 50
Sanhedrin, 45–47, 50
Santa Maria Novella, Church of, 258, 274
Saracens, 167–69, 171, 205, 244
Saragossa fortress, 168
*satura Menippea* (Menippean satire), 111, 113
Saul of Tarsus, 36, 50
Saxon(s), 15, 117–18
    kingdoms, 118
    rebellion, 167
scholastic philosophy, 161
Schweitzer, Albert, 41
Scotus, Duns, 29
*Secret History, The* (Procopius), 17
secular authority, 25
secular education, 15
secular love poetry, 28, 34
secular world, 64, 223, 252–53
Seleucids, 39
Semitic tribes of Palestine, 38
senatorial families, 91–92. *See also* Roman, Senate
Seneca (Roman poet), 140
Sens, archbishop of, 158
separation of church and state, 25
Sepphoris synagogues, 42

Sermon on the Mount, 54, 59
sexual abstinence, 144
Shakespeare
    Forest of Arden, 259
    *Hamlet*, 182
    *King Lear*, 149
    *Midsummer Night's Dream*, 293
    plays, 32, 34, 41
    *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* (Gilbert), 182
Shanzer, Danuta, 111
Shiites, 19
*Sic et Non* (Abelard), 147
Simon (Jesus's brother), 42

Simon the Stylite, 13
*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 34
Sixth Crusade, 211
slaughterhouse, 40
Socrates, 60, 90, 94, 113, 145, 159
Solomon, 38
song of heroic deeds (*chanson de geste*), 165–66, 200
*Song of Roland*, 9, 22, 29, 33, 310
    battle of Christianity against Islam, 167–68, 175, 177
    Blancandrin (Marsile's vassal), 168–69, 171
    Charlemagne, 167–80
    Chrétien de Troyes, 166, 180–83, 310
    court of King Arthur, 166, 182–83, 186–87, 192
    Franks, revenge of the, 177–78
    Ganelon (Roland's stepfather), 169–73, 178–80, 244
    Marsile (Saracen king), 168–71, 173, 175, 177
    Michaelmas, 168–69
    Naimes (Duke), 169–70, 177
    Oliphant (Roland's horn), 172–73, 176–77
    Oliver, Count, 170–78, 180, 200
    Roland (Charlemagne's vassal), 167–71
        desmesure (excessiveness) of, 172–76
    Turoldus, 167
    Turpin of Reims (Archbishop), 170, 172, 174, 176–77
spinning wheels, 29
spiritual
    acquaintance with risen Christ, 41
    authority, 25
    conversion, 69
    foundations of Christianity, 42
    growth toward good, 77
    journey, 70, 78
    kingdom of heaven, 36
    love, 141
    mapping of journey to God, 81
    meaning, 75
    observance, inner, 160
    realm, 22, 155
    rebirth, 44

relationship with God, 44
source of all being, 77
substance and companionship, 74
substance of all created things, 157
union, 141, 149
world, 57
world messenger, 71
*spoudogeloion* (“jesting in earnest”), 111
stag, white, 184
Statius, 227
Stendahl, 192
Stephen (first Christian martyr), 50
Stephen de Garlande, 142, 146–47, 158
*St. Francis in the Desert* (Bellini), 205–206
stigmata, 198, 205, 221
St. Mary of the Angels, Church of, 202
Stoics, 91
Stoppard, Tom, 182
St. Paul's Almonry, 281
Suetonius, 41
Sufis, 19
Suger, Abbot of Saint-Denis, 148, 158
suicide, mass, 56
*Summa Theologica* (Aquinas), 214–16, 222
Sunni, 19
Sweeney, Eileen, 81, 141, 155
Swynford, Katherine, 282
Symmachus (Boethius's father-in-law), 93
synagogues, Greek-speaking, 50
Synoptic Gospels, 54, 57
Syracuse, 17

Tabard Inn (London), 290
Tacitus, 41, 115
taxation and rent payments, 15
Temple in Jerusalem, 35, 38, 40, 45, 56
tax, 40
Ten Commandments, 38
Tennyson, Alfred Lord, 128, 182
Thagaste, 65, 67, 69–70, 73, 80
*thanatos* (death), 95
Theobald, Count, 147
Theodora (Justinian's wife), 17
Theodoric the Great (king of the Ostrogoths), 16, 92–94, 309
Theodosius (emperor), 13–14, 53, 309
*Theologia Christiana* (Abelard), 147, 158
*Theologia “Summi Boni”* (Abelard), 147
theological scholasticism, 114
theological treatises, 110
Thessala, 187–88
Thomas à Becket, Saint (archbishop of Canterbury), 25, 290, 310

Thomas Aquinas, Saint, 10, 30, 34, 114, 161, 310
Albert's assistant instructor in Cologne, 212–13
Albert the Great, 212
Aristotelian thought into Catholic framework, 210–11
Aristotle's logical writings, 213
birth and family, 211
Catholic doctrine, 214
Church Council at Lyons, 222
Cistercian abbey at Fossanova, 222
Dante, 209–10
d'Aquino, Tommaso, 211
death of, 222
devotion to poverty, 209
Dominican friars, 212
Dominicans, 212–14, 227
faith is compatible with reason, 210
God
existence of proven in five ways, 217–19
as final cause of all things, 219–20
intellectual synthesis in, 197
search for, 214
splendor of, 210
understood by reason, 216
union with, 209
happiness from contemplation of truth and pursuit of wisdom, 221
humans vs. other living things, 221
life of, 211–14
mendicant friar, 197
mystical experience, 221–22
Neoplatonism, 213
pagan philosophers, 210
philosophers, studied Greek, Jewish, and Muslim, 211, 214
prisoner at the family castle, 212
Santa Sabina house for friars, 213
*Sed contra* ("On the contrary"), 215–16
self-abnegation, fasting, and mortification of the flesh, 209
Sixth Crusade to Holy Land, 211
*Summa Theologica*, 214–16, 222
Thomism, 211, 215
writings, 214–16
Thomas of Britain, 186
Thomism, 211, 215
Thorkelin, Grim, 119
*Timaeus* (Plato), 102–103, 110
tithes, 21
Titus, 38
Tolkien, J. R. R., 115
Torah, 38, 40, 43
tournaments, pageant-filled, 28

Tours, 19
*translatio studii* ("sum of knowledge"), 195
tribes of Israel, 38, 40, 44

tribes of northern kingdom, 38
*Tristan* (von Strassburg), 29, 34, 186
Tristan and Iseult, 181, 187–88
triumph of human spirit over adversity, 114
Trivium, 29, 33
troubadour poets, 29, 34, 225. *See also* troubadours
troubadours, 29, 165, 180, 199, 225. *See also* troubadour poets
Tuchman, Barbara, 11, 31
Turoldus, 167
Turpin of Reims (Archbishop), 170, 172, 174, 176–77
Tyler, Wat, 283

Uitti, Karl, 184, 187
Umayyad dynasty, 19
universals, 143, 154, 157
University of Bologna, 24, 140
University of Paris, 140
Urban II (pope), 26
Urban VI (pope), 31
Uther Pendragon (king), 184

Valens (Roman eastern emperor), 14
Valerius (bishop of Hippo), 80
Vandals, 15, 17–19
Venetian sailors, 23
vernacular writings, 165
Vespasian (Roman emperor), 38
Vicar of God, 261
vielle (instrument), 166
Vikings, 23, 118
Virgil, 69–70, 90, 137
    *Aeneid*, 116, 129, 165
    Arcadia, 259
    Dante, 234–35, 240–41, 244–48
Virgin Mother, 299, 303
Visconti, Giovanni (lord of Milan), 255
Visigoths, 14–15, 17, 19, 117
von Eschenbach, Wolfram, 29
von Strassburg, Gottfried, 29
Vulgate of Saint Jerome, 21, 33, 139. *See also* Latin, Bible

Wace, Robert, 182–83
Wars of the Roses, 32
Western Schism, 31, 279, 283, 311
Westminster Abbey, Poets' Corner, 284
wheel of fortune, 133
Whitby Abbey, 118
White, T. H., 182
White Guelfs, 229–30
Whites (in Florence), 229
Wiglaf (Beowulf's cousin), 131, 133

William (bishop of Châlons), 143
William II (duke of Normandy), 27
William IX (Duke of Aquitaine), 180
William of Champeaux, 142–43
William of Ockham, 29
William the Conqueror, 27
Wittgenstein, Ludwig, 154–55
*World Lit Only by Fire, A* (Manchester), 11
Worms (city), 25
Wotan, 136

Xanthippe (Socrates' wife), 145

Yom Kippur, 40
*Yvain* (Chrétien de Troyes), 188, 190–91
Yvain (knight), 155, 183, 190–94

*Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* (Aslan), 41
Zealots, 36, 55
Zeffirelli, Franco, 198, 202
Zeno (Roman eastern emperor), 16, 92